

1 Deleuze and the history of philosophy

Deleuze began his philosophical career writing studies of various classic figures in the history of philosophy. His first book, published in 1953, was a study of Hume, and it was followed by a series of monographs on Nietzsche (1962), Kant (1963), Bergson (1966), and Spinoza (1968), which Deleuze continued in the 1980s, when he wrote his studies of Foucault (1986) and Leibniz (1988). In the intervening years he wrote his magnum opus, *Difference and Repetition* (1968), as well as his two-volume work of political philosophy, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972, 1980), co-authored with Félix Guattari. But what is the relation between these two sets of writings – one in the history of philosophy and the other in philosophy proper? Deleuze said that he considered *Difference and Repetition* to be a work in metaphysics. “I feel myself to be a pure metaphysician,” he once claimed. “Bergson says that modern science hasn’t found its metaphysics, the metaphysics it would need. It is this metaphysics that interests me.”¹ Yet the history of philosophy seems to be littered with the detritus of outdated metaphysical systems, including some of the very systems that Deleuze analyzed in his historical monographs. “If we consider any scheme of philosophic categories as one complex assertion,” Whitehead once wrote, “and apply to it the logician’s alternative, true or false, the answer must be that the scheme is false.”² Deleuze seems to have agreed with Bergson and Whitehead that metaphysics provides a schema of concepts adequate to both experience and science, and he attributed a complete positivity to “the power of the false” found in such systems. But what role did Deleuze’s work in the history of philosophy play in the development of his heterogenetic and differential metaphysical system?³

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Deleuze's relation to the history of philosophy must be contextualized, in the first place, in terms of the French academic milieu in which Deleuze was trained as a philosopher.⁴ Stephen Toulmin once quipped that the French do not "do" philosophy, but rather do the history of philosophy – a deliberately humorous exaggeration that nonetheless reflects an institutional reality. In order to pass the *agrégation* examination, which licensed students to teach in secondary schools, French philosophy students were required, primarily, to "do" close readings of classic texts in the history of philosophy, from Plato and Aristotle to Descartes and Kant and beyond, though the texts and names changed every year.⁵ The history of philosophy was, in this sense, something imposed upon Deleuze, while a student at the Sorbonne, as a form of institutional reproduction, whose aim is always to perpetuate the institution through the reproduction of compliant young people. As such, it had an obvious negative function, against which the young Deleuze reacted strongly. "I belong to a generation," he would later write, "that was more or less bludgeoned to death by the history of philosophy. The history of philosophy exercises an obvious repressive function in philosophy: 'You dare not speak in your own name until you've read this and that, and that on this, and this on that.' Many members of my generation never broke free of this" (N 5). At its worst, the result was a form of philosophical thinking that devolved into a kind of scholasticism of texts: endless commentary and interpretation, one-upmanship with regard to knowledge of passages, the writing of perfectly conceived *mémoires*.

In other texts, Deleuze has evoked the specific effects this emphasis on the history of philosophy had on his own philosophical formation:

I was taught by two professors, whom I liked and admired a lot: Alquié and Hyppolite The former had long white hands and a stammer which might have been a legacy of his childhood, or there to hide a native accent, and which was harnessed to the service of Cartesian dualisms. The latter had a powerful face with unfinished features, and rhythmically beat out Hegelian triads with his fist, hanging his words on the beats. At the Liberation, we were still strangely stuck in the history of philosophy. We

simply plunged into Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger; we threw ourselves like puppies into a scholasticism worse than that of the Middle Ages ... After the Liberation, the history of philosophy tightened around us – without our realizing it – under the pretext of opening up a future of thought, which would also be the most ancient thought. The “Heidegger question” did not seem to me to be “Is he a bit of a Nazi?” (obviously, obviously) but “What was his role in this new injection of the history of philosophy?” ... The history of philosophy has always been the agent of power in philosophy, and even in thought. It has played the role of a repressor: how can you think without having read Plato, Descartes, Kant, and Heidegger, and so-and-so’s book about them? A formidable school of intimidation ... So I began with the history of philosophy when it was still being prescribed. For my part, I could not see any way of extracting myself. I could not stand Descartes, the dualisms and the cogito, or Hegel, the triad and the operation of negation. (*D* 12–14)

One can discern in this passage several “reactions” on Deleuze’s part. There is a reaction against Cartesian dualisms and Hegelian triads, which is as much a personal reaction against his teachers (Ferdinand Alquié and Jean Hyppolite) as a philosophical reaction. There is also a reaction against Heidegger, less because of his Nazism than his role with regard to this “injection” of the history of philosophy into the curriculum. Heidegger tended to read past philosophers as if they were his contemporaries (and not simply as moments in an ongoing dialectic, as did Hegel), and Deleuze certainly did the same. Yet he never shared Heidegger’s (or even Nietzsche’s) obsession with the Greeks and the Presocratics. His avowed preference for the Stoics and Lucretius was no doubt a reaction against this Hellenophilia, and he himself tended to prefer seventeenth-century philosophers, notably Spinoza and Leibniz. Heidegger famously wrote little on Spinoza, which would seem to be a surprising omission, since the *Ethics* is a work of pure ontology that poses the problem of ontological difference in terms of the difference between infinite substance (Being) and finite modes (beings). From this viewpoint, Deleuze’s work on Spinoza can be read as his means of working through Heidegger’s problematic of ontological difference in a new manner, just as *Difference and Repetition* could be read as a response to *Being and Time* (for Deleuze, Being is difference, and time is repetition). Where Heidegger returned to the Presocratics (the origin), Deleuze turned to Spinoza (the middle).

Finally, there is also a reaction against what he calls the "scholasticism" of "the three H's" – Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger – which was prevalent after the Liberation. Many French philosophers – such as Levinas, Ricoeur, Derrida, and Lyotard – began their careers with books on Husserl. Significantly, Deleuze never wrote directly on any of "the three H's," though he was obviously immersed in their work, and instead wrote his first book on Hume (*Empiricism and Subjectivity*, which was published in 1953), as if he wanted to add a fourth "H" of his own to the list. In fact, the decision to write on Hume as a student is a good example of the generally heterodox tendencies of the young Deleuze. Vincent Descombes, in his 1980 analysis of *Modern French Philosophy*, characterized the entire generation of philosophers to which Deleuze belongs – which includes Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Serres – by their reaction against Hegel, and in particular against Alexandre Kojève's reading of Hegel.⁶ Foucault had already noted in his 1970 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France: "Whether through logic or epistemology, whether through Marx or Nietzsche, our entire epoch is struggling to disengage itself from Hegel."⁷ Deleuze's early work on Hume was an instance of what he himself would later call a "generalized anti-Hegelianism" (*DR ix*). English philosophy, led by Bertrand Russell, had already gone through its own reaction against Hegel (at least as represented by Bradley) a full half-century earlier than did the French, but for quite specific reasons (*NP ix*). Drawing on the recent developments in logic stemming from the work of Frege and Peano, Russell developed the empiricist theme that relations are external to their terms, which became one of the standard criticisms laid against Hegel (for whom, like Leibniz, relations are internal to their terms). In France, this aspect of Anglo-American philosophy had been taken up by Jean Wahl, whom Deleuze would often cite, in his later writings, with regard to the priority Wahl gave to the conjunction "and" over the copula "is."⁸ Throughout his career, Deleuze remained a great admirer of Russell, and was strongly antagonistic to the effects Wittgenstein's work had had on Anglo-American philosophy (*ABC W*). Writing on Hume, and declaring himself to be an empiricist in the British mold, in other words, was already a direct anti-Hegelian provocation. For Hegel, empiricism itself was almost a non-philosophy, because it tried to grasp "this," "that," "here," and "now" in

an immediate manner, whereas such indexical are universals that can never grasp sensible experience in an unmediated way.⁹ Deleuze dedicated his Hume book to his teacher Jean Hyppolite – “a sincere and respectful homage,” reads the dedication – and the provocation could hardly have been clearer: the twenty-six-year-old student “respectfully” presenting to his Hegelian teacher a thesis on the greatness of empiricism.

Nonetheless, it could be argued that *Empiricism and Subjectivity* occupies a somewhat marginal position within Deleuze’s corpus: Deleuze would eventually turn Hume’s empiricism into what he would later come to call a “transcendental empiricism.” This change was effected in the years between the publication of *Empiricism and Subjectivity* in 1953 and the appearance of *Nietzsche and Philosophy* in 1962, in which Deleuze’s reaction against Hegel appears at its most intense. Deleuze has called this an “eight-year hole” in his life (1953–61), during which he published very little. “I know what I was doing, where and how I lived during those years,” he would later say, “but I know it almost abstractly, rather as if someone else were relating memories that I believe in but don’t really have ... That’s what I find interesting in people’s lives, the holes, the gaps, sometimes dramatic, but sometimes not dramatic at all. There are catalepsies, or a kind of sleepwalking through a number of years, in most lives. Maybe it’s in these holes that movement takes place” (*N* 138). Externally, during these eight years, Deleuze married and had his first child, and moved through a series of temporary academic posts, from the lycée in Orleans to the Sorbonne and CNRS in Paris. But a profound “intensive” movement of thought took place as well: Deleuze emerged pursuing a singular philosophical trajectory that would be worked out in a series of monographs on individual figures – Nietzsche (1962), Kant (1963), Proust (1964), Bergson (1966), Masoch (1967), and Spinoza (1968) – and that would culminate in *Difference and Repetition*, which was the first book in which Deleuze spoke in his own name. “After I studied Hume, Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Proust, all of whom fired me with enthusiasm, *Difference and Repetition* was the first book in which I tried to ‘do’ philosophy” (*DR* xv), having finally extracted himself from the history of philosophy. In this sense, Deleuze’s early monographs in the history of philosophy can be seen, as Michael Hardt has argued, as a long period of “apprenticeship” to philosophy.¹⁰

THE LINE OF FLIGHT

Deleuze's situation as a student in the 1940s, however, was no different from that of any student anywhere. Students in Anglo-American philosophy find themselves faced with a similar "school of intimidation," oriented less around historicism than a certain logicism and naturalism. As Michel Serres says, "freedom of thought always has to be reinvented. Unfortunately, thought is usually only found constrained and forced in a context rigid with impossibilities."¹¹ To be sure, Deleuze's training in the history of philosophy stood him in good stead, since he thought naturally in terms of that history, and in his seminars he would return to and reread many of the same classic texts he had studied at university. As a result, readers of Deleuze's works are often faced with the opposite challenge: constructing for themselves a familiarity with the history of philosophy that Deleuze could take for granted. But the question remains: how did Deleuze manage to escape this conformity and institutional reproduction, and make use of the history of philosophy in pursuit of his own creative project? "We have to see creation as tracing a path between impossibilities," Deleuze would later write. "A creator who is not grabbed around the throat by a set of impossibilities is not a creator ... Without a set of impossibilities, you won't have a line of flight, the exit that is creation, the power of falsity that is truth" (*N* 133). Students who managed to break free of the history of philosophy did so, Deleuze suggests, "by inventing their own particular methods and new rules, a new approach" (*N* 5-6). If they wanted to do "creative" work in this institutional context, philosophy students necessarily had to devise inventive readings that adhered to the institutional requirements, but moved in new directions. François Châtelet, a fellow student at the Sorbonne and later a colleague at Vincennes, recounts a story that illustrates the manner in which Deleuze, as a student, was already negotiating this tension between the university's requirements and his own interpretive invention:

I cherish the memory of a reading by Gilles Deleuze, who had to treat I don't know what classic theme of Nicholas Malebranche's doctrine before one of our most profound and most meticulous historians of philosophy, and had constructed his demonstration, solid and supported with peremptory references, around the sole principle of the irreducibility of Adam's

rib. At the expression of this adopted principle, the master turned pale, and obviously had to keep himself from intervening. As the exposition unfolded, the indignation was changed into incredulity, and then, by the end, into admiring surprise. And he justly concluded by making us all return the next week with our own analysis of the same theme.¹²

The novelist Michel Tournier, another fellow student, similarly recounted that, while at the Sorbonne, Deleuze already “possessed extraordinary powers of translation and rearrangement: all the tired philosophy of the curriculum passed through him and emerged unrecognizable but rejuvenated, with an air of freshness, undigest-edness, and raw newness, utterly startling and discomfiting our weakness and laziness.”¹³

It is not by chance, therefore, that the works of Deleuze and Jacques Derrida, for example, are frequently indexed on creative readings in the history of philosophy. (Both thinkers persistently return to the history of philosophy, even after “experiments” such as Derrida’s *The Post Card* or Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*.) “Deconstruction” can be seen as the new approach that Derrida developed to escape from these institutional constraints, while nonetheless remaining within their parameters – an approach Deleuze appreciated, even though he himself moved in a different direction. “As for the method of deconstruction of texts,” he once remarked, “I see clearly what it is, I admire it a lot, but it has nothing to do with my own method. I do not present myself as a commentator on texts. For me, a text is merely a small cog in an extra-textual practice. It is not a question of commentating on the text by a method of deconstruction, or by a method of textual practice, or by other methods; it is a question of seeing what use it has in the extra-textual practice that prolongs the text.”¹⁴ Instead of asking of a text, “What does it mean?” Deleuze asked, “How does it work” (Where does it take you? What comes through, and what doesn’t?) (*N* 7–8). Indeed, Deleuze’s explanation of his own means of escape is one of the most cited texts in his corpus:

I suppose the main way I coped with it at the time was to see the history of philosophy as a sort of buggery or (it comes to the same thing) as an immaculate conception. I saw myself as taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous. It was really important for it to be his own child, because the author had to actually say all I had him saying. But the child was bound to be monstrous too,

because it resulted from all sorts of shifting, slipping, dislocations, and hidden emissions that I really enjoyed. (*N* 6)

This image of philosophical “buggery,” while provocative and easily misused, nonetheless has a precise sense. As had often been noted, when reading Deleuze’s monographs – whether on Nietzsche, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, or Bergson – one has the distinct impression of entering a “zone” in which Deleuze’s own project and that of the author at hand seem to become indiscernible. They constitute what Deleuze himself calls a “zone of indiscernibility”: on the one hand, there is a becoming-Deleuze of the thinker at hand, as it were; and on the other hand, there is a kind of becoming-Spinoza on Deleuze’s part, for instance, or a becoming-Leibniz, a becoming-Bergson, and so on. This is what Bakhtin called a “free indirect style” of writing, which “testifies to a system which is always heterogeneous, far from equilibrium” (*MI* 73).

This by now familiar style, however, makes for some acute difficulties of interpretation: where does Deleuze end and, say, Spinoza begin? Where does an explication become an interpretation, and an interpretation, a creation (to use hermeneutical terms which Deleuze avoided)? These are not easy questions; such distinctions are, as Deleuze says, indiscernible. Put crudely: in all Deleuze’s readings, one moves from a fairly straightforward “explication” of the thinker at hand, to a more specifically Deleuzian “interpretation,” which often makes use of concepts incorporated from outside thinkers. For instance, Deleuze interprets Spinoza in terms of Duns Scotus’ concept of “univocity,” and Leibniz in terms of the mathematical theory of “singularities,” although neither of these terms appears in Spinoza’s or Leibniz’s texts). Finally, one reaches a kind of “creative” point where Deleuze pushes the thought of the thinker at hand to its “differential” limit, purging it of the three great terminal points of metaphysics (God, World, Self), and thereby uncovering the immanent movement of difference in their thought. This is the point where Deleuze’s own “system” would begin. Evaluating where these different points lie is one of the most challenging and difficult tasks in reading Deleuze – precisely because there are no clear-cut points where the transition is made.

Sometimes, however, interpreters have contented themselves with a quite different task: identifying Deleuze with (or distancing him

from) certain philosophers in the history of philosophy, separating his "friends" from his "enemies." For instance, one could easily imagine drawing up the following four lists. The first would be a list of Deleuze's "canonical" philosophers, those to whom he devoted separate monographs: Hume, Nietzsche, Bergson, Spinoza, Leibniz. To this, one could then add a list of secondary names, philosophers Deleuze loves and refers to often, even though he never wrote a separate monograph on them: Lucretius, the Stoics, Duns Scotus, Maimon, Whitehead. Then there would be the list of Deleuze's ostensible enemies, which would include Plato, Kant, and Hegel. And finally, one could identify certain "hidden" thinkers that Deleuze confronts in a fundamental manner, but who are not frequently discussed directly – most notably Heidegger. With these lists in hand, one could begin to debate, for instance, about who Deleuze's "true" master is. Is it "really" Bergson, as Alain Badiou wants to claim?¹⁵ Is it Nietzsche? Is it Spinoza? Deleuze's own comments in certain texts (such as the "Letter to Michel Cressole") tend to encourage this approach: he says he detested Hegelianism, sought a way to overturn Platonism, thought of his study of Kant as "a book on an enemy," and that his work tends toward "the great Spinoza-Nietzsche identity" (*N* 125).

But the distinction between Deleuze's friends and enemies, or the identification of Deleuze's "true" masters, is at best a preliminary exercise: necessary, perhaps, but certainly not sufficient. The fact is that Deleuze reads every philosopher in the history of philosophy – friend or enemy – in the same manner, following the same strategy, pushing each thinker, so to speak, to their differential limit. (Indeed, this is a point of affiliation with Hegel: Hegel pushes thought to its point of contradiction; Deleuze, to the point of difference.) Deleuze indeed describes his Kant book as "a book on an enemy," but elsewhere he notes, more accurately, that Kant was one of the great philosophers of immanence, and Deleuze unhesitatingly places himself squarely in the Kantian heritage, even if Kant was unable to push the thought of immanence to its necessary conclusion, that is, to its differential conclusion (see *N* 145). Conversely, and for the very same reason, Deleuze often departs from his "friends": he rejects Bergson's critique of intensity in *Time and Free Will*; his Leibnizianism is a Leibnizianism minus God; his Spinozism is a Spinozism minus substance; and Spinoza himself

defined determination as negation – a position from which Deleuze broke strongly in his earliest work. But this does not mean that Deleuze is “anti-Spinoza” or “anti-Leibniz” or “anti-Bergson” – any more than he is simply “anti-Hegel.” Such characterizations, while not entirely inaccurate, are far too simplistic; they miss the movement and “becoming” of Deleuze’s thought, both in itself and in its complex relation to the history of philosophy.

PHILOSOPHY AS THE CREATION OF CONCEPTS

If one considers the books Deleuze wrote on the history of philosophy, abstracted from their specific contents, one can distinguish several common traits. First, Deleuze considered each of the figures he wrote on to be a “minor” philosopher – not in the sense that they were secondary, but that they challenged the “major” conception of the canon, and what Deleuze would come to call its “dogmatic” image of thought (*DR* 131). “I liked writers who seemed to be a part of the history of philosophy, but escaped from it in one respect or altogether ... I see a secret link between Lucretius, Hume, Spinoza, and Nietzsche constituted by their critique of negativity, their cultivation of joy, the hatred of interiority, the externality of forces and relations, the denunciation of power” (*D* 14–15; *N* 6). Bergson had faded into obscurity by the time Deleuze wrote on him: Lévi-Strauss is said to have remarked that “Bergson reduced everything to a state of mush in order to bring out its inherent ineffability,”¹⁶ and Bertrand Russell had penned a number of influential critiques of Bergson, to the point where Deleuze noted “there are people these days who laugh at me simply for having written about Bergson at all” (*N* 6). For Deleuze, this rejection of Bergson was no doubt a sign of the importance of his heterodox work, and Deleuze’s 1966 book *Bergsonism* is now credited with having led to a revival of interest in Bergsonism. Second, and perhaps more importantly, each book presented a *systematic* analysis of the thinker at hand, which considered their work as a whole. In the *Abécédaire* interviews, Deleuze recalls that when he was quite young, he liked the idea of reading an author’s work in its entirety, the complete works, whether in philosophy or literature, and that he considered literary writers to be great thinkers. As a result, he initially tended to have an affection for authors who had written little – he found enormous

corpuses, like Hugo's, to be somewhat overwhelming (*ABC* L). Deleuze retained this emphasis on reading complete works. Unlike Foucault, for instance, whose early work analyzed broad but historically specific "epistemic formations," Deleuze's early writings were focused primarily on the *singularity* of a particular author. Third, Deleuze ultimately located the singularity of philosophers he wrote on in the *concepts* they had created, and the linkages they established between these concepts. "I sometimes dream of a history of philosophy," Deleuze later mused, "that would list only the new concepts created by a great philosopher – his most essential and creative contribution" (*ES* ix). This was the basis for the definition of philosophy that Deleuze and Guattari would propose in their late work, *What is Philosophy?* (1991): "philosophy is the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts" (*WP* 2). Yet this understanding of the task of philosophy had already been implicit in Deleuze's earliest writings. In *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, which was largely written in the 1950s but not published until 1968, Deleuze had written that "the power of a philosophy is measured by the concepts it creates, or whose sense it alters, concepts that impose a new set of divisions on things and actions" (*EPS* 321). Hume, for instance, created the concepts of habit, belief, and association; Spinoza gave an entirely new distribution to the concepts of substance, attribute, and mode; Nietzsche created the concepts of will to power and the eternal return; Bergson invented the notions of duration, *élan vital*, and intuition, and so on.

It is this conception of philosophy as the creation of concepts that lies at the heart of Deleuze's approach to the history of philosophy, although it was only late in his career that Deleuze would finally lay out the principles, so to speak, of his approach. In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze argued that concepts can be analyzed under the double rubrics of their *exo-consistency* and *endo-consistency* (*WP* 19–10). For Deleuze, no concept is ever simple: not only does it link up with other concepts (exo-consistency), but each concept also has its own internal components (endo-consistency), which in turn can themselves be considered as concepts. Descartes' concept of the *cogito*, for instance, can be said to have three components, namely, thinking, doubting, and being: "I (who doubt) think, and therefore I am (a thinking being)." A concept is therefore always a multiplicity: it is composed of a finite number of distinct, heterogeneous,

and nonetheless inseparable components or variations; the concept itself is the point of coincidence, condensation, or accumulation of these component elements, which it renders consistent *in itself*; and this internal consistency in turn is defined by the zones of neighborhood (*voisinage*) or indiscernability that it creates between these components. But like a hypertext, the concept of the *cogito* is an open-ended multiplicity that contains the potential for bridges that provide links or crossroads to other Cartesian concepts. The idea of infinity is the bridge leading from the concept of *cogito* to the concept of God, a new concept that has three components forming the “proofs” for the existence of God. In turn, the third proof (ontological) assures the closure of the concept but also throws out a new bridge or branches off to a concept of extended being, insofar as the concept of God guarantees the objective truth value of our other clear and distinct ideas.

This exo-consistency of concepts extends to the history of philosophy as well. When Kant later criticized the Cartesian *cogito*, he did so in the name of a new problematic field: Descartes could not say under what form the “I think” is capable of determining the “I am,” and this determinable form, Kant argued, is precisely the form of time. In this way, Kant introduced a new component into the Cartesian *cogito*. Yet to say that Kant “criticized” Descartes is simply to say that Kant constructed a problem that could not be occupied or completed by the Cartesian *cogito*. Descartes created the concept of the *cogito*, but he expelled time from it as a form of *anteriority*, making it a simple mode of succession sustained by a continuous divine creation. If Kant introduced time as a new component of the *cogito*, he did so on the condition of *creating a new concept* of time: time now becomes a form of *interiority* with its own internal components (succession, but also simultaneity and permanence). Similarly, to ask if there are precursors to the *cogito* – for instance, in Augustine – is to ask: “Are there concepts signed by previous philosophers that have similar or almost identical components, but from which one component is lacking, or to which others have been added, so that a *cogito* does not crystallize, since the components do not yet coincide in a self?” (*WP* 26). Concepts, in short, possess an *internal* history, a potential for transmutation into other concepts, which constitutes what Deleuze likes to call the “plane of immanence” of philosophy.

Creating concepts is constructing some area in the plane, adding a new area to existing ones, exploring a new area, filling in what's missing. Concepts are composites, amalgams of lines, curves. If new concepts have to be brought in all the time, it's just because the plane of immanence has to be constructed area by area, constructed locally, going from one point to the next. (N 147)

It is precisely through this kind of analysis that one can account for the various kinds of conceptual becomings that one finds in Deleuze's own work, and the transformations he himself introduced into concepts drawn from the history of philosophy. "The history of philosophy," Deleuze writes, "means that we evaluate not only the historical novelty of the concepts created by the philosopher, but also the power of their becoming when they pass into one another" (WP 32).

HISTORY AND BECOMING

In proposing an "analytic" of concepts oriented around their endo- and exo-consistency, Deleuze was not being "historicist" in the usual sense of the term. He did not attempt to "situate" thinkers, or the concepts they created, within their historical period, though he did not deny the determinative role of their historical context. Deleuze's book on the painter Francis Bacon, subtitled *The Logic of Sensation*, is an interesting case in this regard, even though it is not a study of a philosopher. For Deleuze, artists and writers are as much thinkers as philosophers are – they simply think in terms of percepts and affects rather than concepts: painters think in terms of lines and colors, just as musicians think in sounds, writers think in words, film-makers think in images, and so on. In his book on Bacon, Deleuze therefore attempted to create a series of philosophical concepts (the Figure, rhythm, chaos, force, the diagram, and so on) that each relate to a particular aspect of Bacon's paintings, but which also find a place in a general logic of sensation. Rather than analyzing a philosopher's concepts, Deleuze here created his own philosophical concepts that parallel Bacon's artistic work. The text is organized in quasi-musical fashion, divided into seventeen sequences that develop concepts as if they were melodic lines (endo-consistency), which in turn enter into increasingly complex contrapuntal relations that, taken together, form a kind of conceptual composition

that parallels Bacon's sensible compositions (exo-consistency). Yet readers who approach the book expecting a work of art criticism will be disappointed: there is little discussion of the socio-cultural milieu in which Bacon lived and worked; nor of his artistic influences or contemporaries, such as Lucian Freud or Frank Auerbach; nor of his personal life (his homosexuality, his lovers and friends, his drinking and gambling, his nights at the Colony Room club), which played such an evident role in Bacon's work and in his choice of subjects. The reason for this omission, Deleuze explains elsewhere, lies in the distinction he makes between history and becoming.

"I became increasing aware," Deleuze said in an interview with Antonio Negri, "of the possibility of distinguishing between becoming and history ... Becoming is not part of history: history only designates the set of conditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to 'become', that is, to create something new. This is exactly what Nietzsche called the 'untimely'" (N 171). Bacon's personal and social-cultural background constitutes the historical conditions that make his artistic work possible, yet there is nothing in this background that determined Bacon to become a painter, or to paint in a Bacon-esque style. Others shared this background without becoming either artists or painters. In philosophical terms, one could say that history provides the necessary conditions of Bacon's artistic work (history), but says nothing about its sufficient conditions (becoming). Moreover, the very search for conditions, whether necessary or sufficient, always takes place in a retrograde manner: faced with the singularity of Bacon's paintings, one then seeks, after the fact, to "explain" them by elucidating the conditions that led to their production. But the reverse is never the case: one can never, through an examination of current conditions, "explain" that someone is about to write a certain opera or a certain treatise on astronomy. Bacon's work is the creation of something new, the eruption of a becoming, that is to say, an *event* (in Deleuze's sense of this term). What history grasps in an event is the way it was actualized in particular circumstances, but the becoming of the event itself is beyond the scope of history. Events "cannot be explained by the situations that gave rise to them, or into which they lead. They appear for a moment, and it is that moment that matters, it's the chance we must seize" (N 176). This, then, is how Deleuze wound up approaching the works of philosophers, and the concepts they had created, including his own created concepts: as events. He neither sought to explain them in terms

of their historical context, nor to extract eternal and timeless truths from them (or to critique them for *not* being “true”). In this, he took his cue from the French poet Charles Péguy:

In a major philosophical work, *Clio*, Péguy explained that there are two ways of considering an event: the first consists in following the course of the event, examining its effectuation in history, how it is conditioned by and passes away within history, but the second consists in going back into the event, installing oneself within it as in a becoming, growing both young and old in it at once, passing through all its components and singularities. (N 170–71; cf. DR 189)

But what then does it mean to consider philosophical concepts in their “becoming,” in a way that is irreducible to either their historical conditions or their eternal truth? In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze provides an instructive analysis of the difference between the history of philosophy and the history of science. Often, ideas of “progress” (the before and the after) in both science and philosophy are derived from archaic religious conceptions that are dramatized in the use of the calendar: before Christ and after Christ. At a certain moment, everything stops and we start counting over again from zero, assigning negative numbers to the preceding era. Before the Greeks, no one thought, or only thought mythically; then came the Greek miracle, which invented philosophy. The same schema is appealed to when one speaks of the so-called Copernican or Galilean Revolution in science: reason later, unreason before. The Age of Enlightenment was instrumental in categorizing as irrational any reason not formed by science – it was the bid of science to take over the totality of reason, and to remove all rationality from anything that was not science (even though reason is statistically distributed everywhere, and no one can claim exclusive rights to it). The idea of the birth of a new time, or the advent of a new era, is one of the most archaic and quasi-religious conceptions of temporality, yet it is also one of the most persistent. Just as we once situated the earth and ourselves spatially at the center of the universe, we still tend to position ourselves temporally at the cutting edge, at the state-of-the-art of development – a temporal schema that allows us not only to be right, but to be more right than was ever possible before, since the present is always the last word on time and truth.¹⁷

Deleuze rejects this popular temporal schema. Neither science nor philosophy can be reduced to a simple linear succession, but

each can be seen to be structured by a different form of temporality, that is, a different relation between the before and the after. Consider an example from science often invoked by Deleuze: the history of number. In one direction (from before to after), the history of number can be defined by a series of breaks or ruptures with previous conceptions: the fractional number breaks with whole numbers, the irrational number breaks with rational numbers, and Riemannian geometry breaks with Euclidean geometry (*WP* 124; cf. *DR* 232). But in the other direction (from after to before), one can say that the whole number appears as a particular "case" of the fractional number ($2 = 2/1$), or the rational number as a "cut" in a linear set of points (Dedekind), or Euclidean geometry as a case of abstract metrical geometry. From this second perspective, one can say that there is indeed a unifying progress to science, but one that works in a retrograde direction (as when Newtown is derived from Einstein). Science can thus be said to operate within a temporality that is *serial* and *ramified*, in which the "before" designates bifurcations and ruptures to come, and the "after" designates retrospective reconnections.

But the same is not true of philosophy. To simply say that Kant breaks with Descartes, or that the Cartesian *cogito* is a particular case of the Kantian *cogito*, says Deleuze, "is hardly satisfying, since this is, precisely, to turn philosophy into a science" (*WP* 125). In science, there is no need to work through a named equation; one simply uses it. In philosophy, however, Kant does not simply use Descartes' concept of the *cogito*; rather, he is forced to work through the concept again in order to alter its components (endo-consistency), as well as its relation to other concepts (exo-consistency) – whence the impression that philosophers are always starting over again. "Philosophical time," Deleuze writes, "is thus a grandiose time of coexistence that does not exclude the before and after but superimposes them in a *stratigraphic* order" (*WP* 50). The temporality of philosophical concepts, in other words, is like the temporality of geological strata: layers deposited eons apart lie on top of or next to each other; intermittent earthquakes produce dramatic breaks and ruptures in these layers, driven underneath by continuous and barely perceptible molten movements that propel the surface crust – a coexistence of superimposed strata in space and multiple scales of time. Mathematics provides a similar model in the field of topology: I can mark out points on a flat piece of paper, but if I crumple or fold the paper,

two distant points may find themselves in the neighborhood of each other, or even superimposed; and if I tear the paper at certain places, two points that were close can become very distant. Whereas metrical geometry is the science of stable points and well-defined distances, topology is this science of neighborhoods and tears – whence Deleuze's interest in the concept of the fold. It is as if the temporality of philosophical concepts has an extraordinarily complex variety, with stopping points, ruptures, shafts, chimneys of acceleration, rifts, and lacunae, with their multifarious interactions.

It was this new model of temporality that Deleuze utilized in his analyses of the becoming of philosophical concepts as events. Similarly, in his preface to *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze commented on his "untimely" use of the history of philosophy that rejected the alternatives of temporal/nontemporal or historical/eternal: "There is a great difference between writing history of philosophy and writing philosophy. In the first case, we study the arrows or the tools of a great thinker, the trophies and the prey, the continents discovered. In the second case, we trim our own arrows, or gather what seem to be the finest arrows, only to shoot them in other directions, even if the distance they travel is relatively short rather than stellar" (*DR* xv). The book is filled with numerous examples of topological transformations of concepts drawn from the history of philosophy, all of which are now put in the service of Deleuze's own "heterogenetic" metaphysics. Deleuze, for instance, develops a theory of Ideas that draws on both the Platonic and Kantian notions of the Idea, folding them together, as it were, into a single plane that constitutes a new concept (*DR* 168–70). Similarly, when Deleuze takes up Duns Scotus' concept of univocity – like a very old stratum rising to the surface again (*WP* 58) – and claims that there is a tradition of univocity that extends from Parmenides to Heidegger, passing through Spinoza and Nietzsche, he is bringing these otherwise distant thinkers together in a single "neighborhood" that allows them to communicate with each other (*DR* 35–42). Conversely, when he formulates his concept of intensity, he opens up a distance between his own concept and the Bergsonian critique of intensity, which he finds unconvincing (*DR* 239). Using Deleuze's own image, the history of philosophy plays a role in the book that is roughly analogous to that of *collage* in painting (*DR* xxi), bringing together disparate

elements and tracing out lines "that crosscut history without being confused with it" (*WP* 59).

One can thus trace out a complex trajectory in Deleuze's relation to the history of philosophy. As a student, he experienced the required curriculum in the history of philosophy as "a formidable school of intimidation that manufactures specialists in thought" (*D* 13), and he combated this conformism by choosing to write on authors "who seemed to be part of the history of philosophy, but who escaped from it in one respect or another: Lucretius, Spinoza, Hume, Nietzsche, Bergson" (*DR* 14). In the process of writing on these philosophers, he developed a use of the history of philosophy that was neither historical nor eternal, but "untimely," and which found its first expression in *Difference and Repetition* and its theoretical elaboration in *What is Philosophy?* Looking back on this line-up of favored philosophers, Deleuze later noted:

These thinkers have few relationships with each other – apart from Nietzsche and Spinoza – yet they do have them. One might say that something happens between them, at different speeds and at different intensities, which is not in one or the other of them, but truly in *an ideal space*, which is no longer a part of history, still less a dialogue among the dead, but an interstellar conversation, between very irregular stars, whose different becomings form a mobile bloc which it would be a case of capturing. (*D* 15–16)

This is where Deleuze's work in the history of philosophy and his development of a differential metaphysics became one and the same thing, since it is precisely in this ideal space that, as Deleuze puts it, "philosophy is becoming, and not history; it is the coexistence of planes, and not the succession of systems" (*WP* 59).

Yet one must add that the trajectory Deleuze followed does not necessarily imply a prescription for others. To diagnose the becomings of the present is the task Nietzsche assigned to the philosopher as "the physician of civilization," and Deleuze often spoke of the difficulties faced by young philosophers. "What part can philosophy play in resisting a terrible new conformism?" Deleuze asked in a 1980 interview.

The generation to which I belong was, I think, a strong one (with Foucault, Althusser, Derrida, Lyotard, Serres, Faye, Châtelet, and others). What now seems problematic is the situation of young philosophers, but also all young writers, who are involved in creating something. They face the

threat of being stifled from the outset. It has become very difficult to do any work, because a whole system of “acculturation” and anti-creation specific to the developed nations is taking place. It’s far worse than censorship. Censorship produces a ferment beneath the surface, but reaction seeks to make everything impossible. (*N* 27)

But it is precisely in such impossible situations, with their choked passages, that creation takes place. The creation of concepts itself is an appeal to a new earth and a new people who do not yet exist. To think the past, in order to act on the present, in favor (one hopes) of a future to come – such is the task of the philosopher. “But there is no general prescription ... Nothing can be known in advance” (*D* 144; *ATP* 461).

NOTES

- 1 From Deleuze’s interview with Arnaud Villani in the latter’s *La guêpe et l’orchidée: essai sur Gilles Deleuze* (Paris: Belin, 1999), p. 130.
- 2 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, corrected edition, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), p. 8.
- 3 The reflections in the paragraphs that follow are adapted in part from material developed in an earlier article, “Deleuze, Hegel, and the Post-Kantian Tradition,” *Philosophy Today* (Supplement 2001), 126–38.
- 4 The French academic milieu has been analyzed by Pierre Bourdieu in works such as *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Stanford University Press, 1988) and *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, trans. Laretta C. Clough (Stanford University Press, 1988).
- 5 For an analysis of the role of the *agrégation* examination in determining the direction of philosophical work in France, see Alan Schrift’s *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy: Key Themes and Thinkers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 201–4 (202n discusses the tension between competence and creativity in the exam assessments, as evidenced by the tension between the Sorbonne and the *École normale supérieure*). Schrift also edited the magisterial eight-volume *History of Continental Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), which is an indispensable guide to the many complexities of twentieth-century European philosophy.
- 6 See Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 12: “In 1945, all that was modern sprang from Hegel ... In 1968, all that was modern was hostile to Hegel.”

- 7 Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 235.
- 8 See ATP 526, n.32: "Jean Wahl's works contain profound reflections on this sense of 'and,' on the way it challenges the primacy of the verb 'to be.'"
- 9 See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 1979), section on "Sense Certainty." See also Deleuze's comment in NP 4: "Hegel wanted to ridicule pluralism, identifying it with a naive consciousness which would be happy to say 'this, that, here, now' – like a child stuttering out its most humble needs."
- 10 See Michael Hardt, *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), which analyzes Deleuze's readings of Nietzsche, Bergson, and Spinoza.
- 11 Michel Serres, with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 43.
- 12 François Châtelet, *Chronique des idées perdues* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 1977), p. 46; the professor referred to was probably Ferdinand Alquié.
- 13 Michel Tournier, *The Wind Spirit: An Autobiography*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Boston: Beacon Ness, 1988), pp. 127–28; see also pp. 134–35 and 157.
- 14 Deleuze was responding to a question posed to him during the Cerisy colloquium on Nietzsche in 1972; see *Nietzsche aujourd'hui*, vol. 1, *Intensities* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions 10/18, 1973), pp. 186–87.
- 15 Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans. Louise Burchill (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 39: "Deleuze is a marvelous reader of Bergson, who, in my opinion, is his real master, far more than Spinoza, or perhaps even Nietzsche."
- 16 Richard Rorty, "Unsoundness in Perspective" [review of Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*], in *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 June 1983, p. 619. Rorty seems to have been thinking of the following passage by Claude Levi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* [1955], trans. John and Doreen Whiteman (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), pp. 55–56: "Rejecting the Bergsonian acts of faith and circular arguments which reduced beings and things to a state of mush, the better to bring out their ineffability, I came to the conclusion that beings and things could retain their separate values without losing the clarity of outline which defines them in their relation to each other and gives an intelligible structure to each."
- 17 On all these points, see Serres, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, pp. 48–51, 138–39.