

## ***Fragments, plinths and shattered bricks: Deleuze and atomism***

by YANNIS CHATZANTONIS

### **Abstract**

There are two links that stand in the foreground of Deleuze's treatment of Epicurus and Lucretius: the themes of immanent naturalism and of the externality of ontological relations. However, the links are problematised in *Difference and Repetition*, which presents an important critique of the concept of the atom. I will argue that this critique reveals the limits of the intellectual affinity between ancient atomism and Deleuzian metaphysics; in particular, that Deleuze's notions of relationality and *spatium* respond to problems raised by the relations between atoms and by the not-being of the atomists' *vacuum*. In this sense, Deleuze's treatment of atomism is significant because it makes clear Deleuze's aim in shifting the mereological vocabulary from points to lines; it shows what, in Deleuze's sense, it means to unfound and sets down the conditions for a successful Deleuzian critique of essentialist varieties of the metaphysics of structure.

### **Introduction**

Although the entry points to understanding Deleuze's concept of multiplicity are themselves multiple, I approach the issues involved through an examination of Deleuze's mereological vocabulary. This is because I think that the ontogenetic processes described by Deleuze may be legitimately translated into a theory of composition, entailing theories of entanglement, disjunction and partial differentiation; in other words, I believe that Deleuze's metaphysics do contain re-castings of the mereological concepts of divisibility and indivisibility of wholes and dependence and independence of parts.

In particular, Deleuze's mereology presents a critique of essentialist and foundationalist varieties of the metaphysics of structure. Mereological essentialism is premised on the primacy of being over relationality and, hence, on the positing of ontological relations as internal: it asserts that the parts of a whole are internally related to the whole itself – and that these relations permeate and exhaust the parts. Parts, then, are but moments in the unfolding composition of the whole, which, in turn, possesses the character of a foundational structure that brings together its parts as its moments.

My aim is to undertake a brief survey of Deleuze's writings on ancient atomism and on the concept of the atom in general. Deleuze's treatment of atomism is significant because it makes clear Deleuze's aim in shifting the mereological vocabulary from points to lines. In other words, it sets down the conditions for a successful Deleuzian critique of essentialist metaphysics of structure and it shows what, in Deleuze's sense, it means to

unfound.

There are two links that become important in Deleuze's treatment of Epicurus and Lucretius and which appear to secure a not so hidden link between Deleuzian and atomist ontologies: the themes of immanent naturalism and of the externality of ontological relations. The link is problematised in *Difference and Repetition*, which presents a barely developed – but, I hope to show, important – critique of the concept of the atom.

### The fragmentary

In 'The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy', Deleuze commends the atomists for thinking 'the diverse as diverse' (Deleuze 1990: 266). It is, he claims, with Epicurus and Lucretius that 'the real noble acts of philosophical pluralism begin' (Deleuze 1990: 267). Atomism is a speculative and practical naturalism because it is Nature that constitutes the principle of diversity that explains the production of the diverse. The atomists attempted to make sense of actual macroscopic diversity with reference to a realm of microscopic diversity, that is, in terms of atomic multiplicity and, further, they tried to understand the principle of this multiplicity in a manner that resisted the identification of 'the principle with the One or the Whole' (Deleuze 1990: 267), as *ἀρχή*, *foundation* or root. Insofar as it is Nature that produces the diversity of the world, this world stands in stark contrast to the arboreal world in respect of its structure, genesis and power of production. The root bears the cosmos by constituting the causal and productive supplement and totalising foundation of the multiplicity of parts. On the contrary, the atomists' nature is a 'power' of conjunction: 'it expresses itself through "and", and not through "is". This *and* that [...]' (Deleuze 1990: 267). Insofar as the world refers to Nature as the principle underlying the production of worldly diversity, then the product refers not to a producer but to a process of immanent production.

The thread is picked up again in an essay on Hume included in *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*. Here, Deleuze revisits the theme of the composition and of the type of relationality that obtains between the atomic components of the Epicurean cosmos. The tone remains one of intellectual lineage, affinity and alliance. This time, however, the role of the 'secret link' binding him to Lucretius is played by the problematic of a logic of relations constituted by 'the externality of forces' and 'the hatred of interiority' (Deleuze 1995: 6). The entanglements of atoms correspond to a way of composition in which the connectivity and relationality of 'punctual minima' is always 'established between these terms' and are 'always external to them'. In this way, Epicurean theory 'breaks with the constraining form of the predicative judgment and makes possible an autonomous logic of relations, discovering a conjunctive world of atoms and relations' (Deleuze 2005: 38).

However, the link connecting Deleuze and ancient atomism is strongest in a series of writings that develop the notion of the fragmentary, a mereological term that Deleuze

casts against the essentialist conception of parthood.

Deleuze's mereology is explicitly committed to a mode of production of wholes that does not have 'recourse either to any sort of original totality (not even one that has been lost), or to a subsequent totality that may not yet have come about'. This unequivocal commitment fosters the anti-essentialist import of Deleuzian metaphysics. Thus, 'it is only the category of multiplicity, used as a substantive and going beyond both the One and the many, beyond the predicative relation of the One and the many' that can account for the production of wholes composed of fragments (Deleuze & Guattari 2004: 42). This mode of production (the 'desiring-production' of *Anti-Oedipus*) is 'pure multiplicity, that is to say, an affirmation that is irreducible to any sort of unity' (Deleuze & Guattari 2004: 42). This establishes that the oft-repeated Deleuzian slogan and prescription to think multiplicity as a substantive rather than as an adjective is tantamount to treating the multiple as irreducible to any kind of unity. The fragment responds to this explicit and vocal theoretical commitment.

A fragmented whole is one composed of 'partial objects, bricks that have been shattered to bits, and leftovers' (Deleuze & Guattari 2004: 42); in the 'fragmented universe', 'the law never unites anything in a single Whole (Deleuze & Guattari 2004: 42). The fragmented whole 'does not totalise' the parts *alongside* which the whole appears and the whole *of* which it is; 'it is a unity *of* all of these particular parts but does not unify them'. Such a non-totalising totality is 'a sum that never succeeds in bringing its various parts together so as to form a whole' (Deleuze & Guattari 2004: 42). These totalities are construed neither as 'primordial' nor as 'final' but only as 'peripheral', that is, superimposed and fabricated as a by-product of the production. But the whole is not just a part that coexists alongside the fragments that 'it neither unifies nor totalises' (Deleuze & Guattari 2004: 43): the whole is 'contiguous to them, it exists as a product that is produced apart from them and yet at the same time is related to them' (Deleuze & Guattari 2004: 43-4).

The issue here concerns the nature of the gaps that subsist 'even between things that are contiguous' (Deleuze & Guattari 2004: 43) and of the kind of 'interlocking' that takes place between fragments and over the intervals that separate them. The formulations of *Anti-Oedipus* seem to push Deleuze and Guattari's metaphysics towards a conception of parthood in terms of independent pieces and of wholeness in terms of fragmented ensembles that are only nominally unified. The description of fragments reflects such a tendency: parts are likened to 'hermetically sealed boxes, non-communicating vessels, watertight compartments' (Deleuze & Guattari 2004: 42-3).

In *Essays Critical and Clinical*, this entanglement is likened to the interlocking of uncemented stones of a wall. The parts of this wall are singularities, that is, 'remarkable and non-totalisable parts extracted from a series of ordinary points' (Deleuze 1998: 57). These parts are fragments and their walls constitute 'collections of fragments' (Deleuze 1998: 56). Fragments are 'grains, which reveal or at least refer to 'the hidden back-

ground'. Conversely, parts are 'fragments that cannot be totalised' (Deleuze 1998: 58). The wall itself is a whole that must be invented, fabricated or conquered: 'a kind of whole must be constructed, a whole that is all the more paradoxical in that it only comes *after* the fragments and leaves them intact, making no attempt to totalise them' (Deleuze 1998: 58).

According to mereological essentialism, the properties of parts are determined by their distance from the foundation or by the coordinates that they occupy within the whole, so that what parts do or possess is an emergent function that does not pre-exist the whole. The moment has only a function that exhausts its being. The relations between the parts permeate and exhaust them. Deleuze's stones, in contrast, compose a whole in which '*relations are external to their terms*' (Deleuze 1998: 58). Again, the outside is here construed in atomist terms as *vacuum*; this explains in what externality consists and how the *relata* that are irreducible to the relations that are assigned them in a whole and *after* the unity of the whole come to be related – *before* unity. These are relations that remain firmly outside them and which pre-exist the formation of the whole or the filling of the 'empty places' by fragments (Deleuze 1988: 14). These fragments *become* interlocked, entangled relational parts *after* the relations and *before* the whole the parts of which they are. On the contrary, Deleuze argues that 'relations are not internal to a Whole; rather, the Whole is derived from the external relations of a given moment, and varies with them' (Deleuze 1998: 59). In this way, the claim that relations are external to the *relata* implies the primacy of relations over the *relata* and of the parts over the whole.

Like the atomists' cosmos, the world that Deleuze charts in his writings on the notion of the fragment neither needs nor allows a cosmogonical principle that would reside outside the cosmos. The externality of relations is the fundamental premise of his naturalism. Nature, Deleuze writes in true Epicurean spirit, 'is not a form, but rather the process of establishing relations. It invents a polyphony: it is not a totality but an assembly, a "conclave", a "plenary session"' (Deleuze 1998: 59). The parts of the fragmented cosmos hold fast in their heterogeneity: their relationality, which is only added to them when they come to occupy the empty places that are created by relations, does not belong to them from inside and, hence, they do not constitute non-independent partial objects, from the beginning constituted *within* and *after* the totalising whole that they make up. Internal relations delimit 'the empire of structure': structure is defined as a whole that 'has an axiomatic nature' and that 'forms a homogeneous system' (Deleuze 1988: 14). In contrast, the only connections that the heterogeneity of the parts allows are relations of 'camaraderie' between fragments that are independent in the sense that these relations are established – 'acquired and created' (Deleuze 1998: 60) – *between* the fragments and *outside* them. Thus, 'camaraderie is the variability that implies an encounter with the Outside' (Deleuze 1998: 60). This is a mode of connection that does not emanate from a foundation that connects parts while staying fast within itself. Fragments are spontane-

ous: their movement is not pre-determined to cross the positions assigned by the foundation; instead, the parts are free to fall into empty places established by 'living relations' existing outside them and between them. The parts are separated by 'intervals' guaranteeing their heterogeneity and it is in these intervals – the Outside and the *entre-deux* – that processes of composition and production take place. Conjunction presupposes disjunction: the and ceases to be subordinated to the is only when it takes place between conjuncts that are separate, in the disjunctive expanses of what-is-not.

These are the basic parameters in which Deleuze develops an account of interlocking and entanglement that one may safely situate within the Epicurean tradition. Deleuze's wall of uncemented stones – of 'plinths' (Deleuze 1988: 16) – serves as a model according to which composition is redefined as the weaving of 'a web of variable relations, which are not merged into a whole, but produce the only whole that man is capable of conquering in a given situation' (Deleuze 1998: 60).

### **Deleuze's critique: the issue of atomic independence**

In spite of appearances to the contrary – and there are plenty of those in Deleuze's writings as my survey has shown – the *fragment*, which constitutes Deleuze's mereological alternative to the *moment* of essentialist composition and which seemed to situate Deleuze safely in the Epicurean tradition, should not be confused with the *piece*. This becomes clear in the brief but significant treatment of atomism in *Difference and Repetition*. The focus remains the same, namely, atomic independence. The atomists are again commended for positing 'multiplicities of atoms' (Deleuze 2004: 232); for insisting that atomic microscopic plurality precedes actual macroscopic unity; for considering the unity of sensible wholes to be the product of aggregation of atoms that are 'related to other atoms at the heart of structures which are actualized in sensible composites' (Deleuze 2004: 232); for employing the clinamen, which Deleuze interprets as the condition of inter-atomic relationality, as the aggregative principle that purports to explain the whole made of parts in terms of atomic entanglement.

However, the atomists' account of multiplicity as atomic compromises the force of their pluralism. This becomes evident as soon as one poses the question of the nature of the multiple parts of Nature. Nature is a sum, but a sum of what? Deleuze responds reading Lucretius: Nature before individuals, their parts and their species, is 'addition of indivisibles', atoms, and 'empty spaces', void, 'plenitude and void, beings and nonbeings' (Deleuze 1990: 267). At this point Deleuze raises his objection: Nature is 'multiplicities of atoms' but 'the Epicurean atom still retains too much independence, a shape and an actuality' (Deleuze 2004: 233).

What does it mean to say that atoms 'have too much independence'? A compound whole composed of atoms is an entanglement of absolutely separate elements. The con-

junction of atoms in such compounds presupposes disjunction between the elements, which therefore become entangled from without and never from within. Enclosure requires closure: atoms are enclosed in compounds *because* they are closed in themselves. As a consequence, the atomists do not propound a theory of composition by mixture of being and not-being, but a theory of entanglement or intertwinement according to which discrete beings interlock when they are trapped or enclosed, confined or locked with other beings existing and moving in empty space. This does not amount to a theory of mixture because the density and solidity of body is constant, being invariably absolutely full; the same applies to the intangibility and non-resistance of the void, being invariably absolutely empty. Macroscopic objects, the products of complication, are more or less porous precisely because they are compounds not of being and not-being but of beings in not-being. Void is absolutely permeable, body absolutely impermeable; these are exhaustive definitions. Phenomena of relative fluidity and solidity observable in macroscopic bodies concern neither the absolute rigidity of bodies nor the absolute intangibility of the void, but only the ratio expressing the number of atomic magnitudes locked in a particular segment of space. This ratio expresses a relative density neither of being nor of not-being nor, what is more, of a mixture of being and not-being but a density that is relative to the entanglement of absolutely full bodies in absolutely empty space and that determines the nature of the entanglement or interlocking: relatively solid or fluid, earth, water or air. Thus, the question that the Epicurean physicist asks, and which helps to explain what it is about this physics that appeals to Deleuze and draws him to Lucretius' naturalism, is a quantitative question: 'How many locked atoms?' and 'How large an area of confinement?'. With Epicurus and Lucretius, Deleuze comments quoting directly from Lucretius' poem, 'it is a matter of resemblances and differences, compositions and decompositions, "everything is formed out of connections, densities, shocks, encounters, concurrences, and motions"' (Deleuze 1990: 268).

However, despite this intellectual affinity and alliance, Deleuze amends, reformulates and radicalises the atomists' question. For, in order to reach a concept of the many that does not presuppose that 'it's still Unity, and thus being, that's primary, and that supposedly becomes multiple' (Deleuze 1990: 44), a theory of composition must steer clear of *both* varieties of the logic of totalisation: that is, the danger relies not only in theories that reduce composition to the 'externalisation of a whole', as is the case with the *foundation*, but also in those theories that reduce composition to the 'internalisation in a whole', as is the case with the atom (Deleuze 1990: 64). Instead, Deleuze declares, 'multiplicity is never in the terms, however many, nor in all the terms together, the whole. Multiplicity is precisely in the "and", which is different in nature from elementary components [*elements*] and collections of them' (Deleuze 1990: 44).

Deleuze's criticism amounts to the diagnosis of the atomists' failure to unfound. This diagnosis revolves around the role that not-being plays in the atomist theory of differentiation. In particular, the criticism points to Deleuze's conditions for an account of multi-

plicity and parthood, of disjunction and connection, of composition and structure. Central to these conditions is the critique of the atomist conception of the *spatium* of the between, of discontinuity and disjunction and the role that not-being, as void, empty space and nothing, plays in these. For atomism, the void is the site in which relations that are external to the terms are established; between the self-enclosed and self-unified atoms there is spatial emptiness. Parts are considered to be unified in themselves only because they are radically separate; in this way their simplicity, the fact that they are wholes without parts that come to be entangled, but never to mix, in wholes with parts, is theoretically guaranteed. *There is nothing between the parts*. If anything but nothing lay between atoms, atoms would face the danger of fission. Thus, commitment to atomic enclosure and unity entail commitment to the existence of not-being. The account of multiplicity in terms of pieces or atoms does not satisfy the ‘conditions of structure’ (Deleuze 2004: 233) that Deleuze has set for the understanding of the many and does not amount to a reversal of the essentialist picture of composition and to a radical or consistent conception of *effondement*. To reverse this picture it is not enough to begin with the many, in which case the foundation is now transferred within the atom-pieces, but rather not to begin or to begin in the middle, ‘to follow and disentangle lines rather than work back to points’ (Deleuze 1995: 86), that is, to place concreteness on the manyness of the many, without any recourse to the mediation of a foundation, whether atomic or substantial.

What this means for the conditions of a successful account of multiplicity is that the single formula ‘there is nothing between the parts’, which in two contrasting senses lay at the heart of both essentialism and atomism, needs to be rejected in both of these employments. There must be *something* between the parts that is *neither* nothing, in the atomist sense of ontological emptiness and the discontinuity of the void, *nor* nothing, in the essentialist sense of the overflowing continuity secured by the being of the root: there is the something in the between, which is neither being nor not-being but inter-being: it is in this intensive *spatium* that multiplicity is discovered: within the atom and under the ground.

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