
'Thought without an Image' Deleuzian philosophy as an ethics of the event

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Abstract

According to Gilles Deleuze, all thinking, acting, experience and perception – indeed, all of life – is a process of imaging. Following Deleuze, philosophy then is not a discipline concerned with uncovering what the self is. Philosophy, rather, is an interrogation into the production of images of thought and ultimately it is the quest for 'thought without an image.' As philosophers, our task is not to establish the truest world but to think the multiplicity and plurality of perceptions that unfold divergent worlds. In short: the key issue for philosophy is not to point to a more real image, but to insist that thinking, in so far as it is a potential for imaging, can only be maximized by not allowing any single image to govern all others. This is an ethics of the event, defined not by what we are, but by the potential of thought to open itself to the sphere of the virtual - that is, to what is not already given.

Introduction

"To think is to create – there is no other creation – but to create is first of all to engender 'thinking' in thought" (Deleuze 2004: 185). This line from *Difference and Repetition* expresses the aspect of Deleuze's work that will be the focus of this essay namely, to make of thinking, and especially philosophical thinking, an endeavour that is truly creative. Thinking, in this sense, cannot be subordinate to factors that predetermine and confine what thinking should be. The objective of Deleuze's project is to lay out a philosophy of difference that truly thinks difference without reducing it to a *pre*-supposed, *pre*-determining and ultimately restrictive identity (Bell 2006). But what are the conditions of thinking in the Deleuzian *sense*? What do we need to *do* to enable such thinking to take place?

In this essay these questions will be addressed by showing, first of all, why representation, and its essentially moralistic view of the world, constitutes a particularly restrictive and exclusionary form of thinking and acting.

Following Deleuze, a radically different idea of philosophy and of what it really means to think will be proposed. This new conception of thinking – and of philosophy – will be brought to bear on our understanding of ethics and its relation to difference. Deleuze conceives of ethics as an *event* and as inextricably linked with the sole aim of philosophy: to become imperceptible or, as Deleuze would also say, to become worthy of the *event*. The essay will conclude with a few suggestions of what such an ethics might entail.

Against common sense: Deleuze's critique of the representational 'image of thought'

What, precisely, is an 'ethics of the *event*?' In order to give this question an appropriate consideration, we need to, first of all, establish what ethics is not. Deleuze draws a very clear distinction between ethics and morality. Morality, as we know, implies that we judge ourselves and others on the basis of what we *pre-suppose* we are and should be. In contrast to this, Deleuzian ethics implies that we do not yet know what we might *become*. In short, morality is problematic in so far as it is rooted in an objectifying, representational or dogmatic 'image of thought.'

Distinct 'images of thought' may be defined by reference to the presuppositions which define the nature of thought and which, in this way, provide the plane of theoretical consistency for how life is perceived, experienced and understood. Deleuze criticises thought defined in terms of identity in recognition and representation by showing what that definition is falsely ignoring or excluding. According to Deleuze, such definitions are always already objectifying and presupposing what they seek to exclude. In chapter three of *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze (2004) describes and criticises the representational image by showing how the presuppositions of such an image inevitably make us miss the 'essence' of difference.

One of the presuppositions Deleuze severely criticises is the assumption that there are certain, common sense facts that 'everybody knows.'

This element consists ... of the presupposition that there is a natural capacity for thought endowed with a talent for truth or an affinity with the true, under the double aspect of a *good will on the part of the thinker* and an *upright nature on the part of thought* (Gilles Deleuze in Williams 2005:115).

This presupposition is moral in so far as it is assumed that it is how thinkers and thought, in principle, ought to be, regardless of how they are. The point of Deleuze's criticism here is that the representational or dogmatic 'image of thought' perpetuates the common sense illusion that there are moral laws, while in fact, there are only morally established habits.

A possible response to Deleuze's critique regarding presuppositions

could very well be that philosophy, explicitly and out of necessity, ought to adopt these presuppositions or else it will fall into quietist despair. From a moralistic standpoint, the destruction of all presuppositions does not take account of social, political and moral values and this seems to be undeniably bad. Deleuze, although he is very much aware of this response to his critique, still insists on the 'dangerous' and possibly 'immoral' path of uncovering and destroying all presuppositions.

A further response to Deleuze's critique is: can presuppositions ever really be done away with? Should the proper and superior role of philosophy not be to select the right presuppositions, instead of seeking to do away with all of them? If presuppositions are really inevitable, Deleuze has merely missed the fact that he has 'implicitly' adopted pessimistic ones (Williams 2005).

Deleuze's response to all of these critical points turns on the very familiar argument that even the most obvious, unequivocal and seemingly universal moral values have, in the past, turned out to be restrictive, erroneous and divisive. Instead of presupposing and affirming any obvious or given values, the superior role of the philosopher is to criticise all emergent 'obvious' values or *doxa*. Deleuze knows that both Descartes and Kant are well aware of this since they claim that the presupposition of the good and shareable nature of thought is only *by right* or *in principle*, and not in fact. For Descartes, as for Kant the good and shareable nature of thought is only formal; it does not concern specific empirical content. According to Deleuze, however, this line of thought still misses the way in which the supposedly empty form of thought continues to establish 'obvious' values and a *doxa* with an exclusive empirical content.

In broad outline Deleuze argues that, if thought is, as it is claimed, good and shareable in principle, it should be able to create unity, not only within each individual thinker but also between different thinkers. This has the implication that different faculties must in principle, be treatable in the same way, and that different selves should be able to judge or know when thought is correct. So how, Deleuze asks, are the different faculties united by the single faculty of thought? And, furthermore, how are we able to judge different thoughts? According to Kant (Deleuze 2004) we are able to reflect on the various faculties, and we are able to actively think and talk about the object of each faculty, because we are able to *recognise* those objects. The identification of the proper object of each faculty depends on the transcendent faculty of recognition which is supposedly shared and has access to all the other faculties. But if the faculty of recognition is purely formal and empty of content why, then, does Deleuze still have a problem with it? Neither Descartes nor Kant (Deleuze 2004) is making any suppositions as to the specific content of recognition when they say that, in

order to use the different faculties, we must be able to recognise their objects. In so far as recognition is a condition for anything to be registered as existing, how could it possibly be exclusive?

According to Deleuze, a general category of things is necessarily still excluded due to the particular form of recognition. In other words, due to the fact that recognition proceeds by objectifying and comparing the new with what is already known or what has already been experienced. To put this differently, recognition operates by objectifying and referring difference back to that which has already been recognised and experienced. It discounts the new and virtual qualities of pure difference. For Deleuze, the problem with recognition lies in the fact that recognition necessarily depends on representation. To be able to recognize the object of a faculty, we have to consider the object in terms of an identity that we can conceive of, an analogy that we can judge, an opposition that we can imagine and a similarity that we can perceive (Williams 2005).

According to Deleuze, the representational 'image of thought' perpetuates a reductive and damaging illusion that hides reality seen in terms of pure difference or difference 'in itself.' For Deleuze, pure difference exists in the form of intensities or forces and it is the virtual condition for (the possibility of) all actual identities; it is necessary for the explanation of significance and sensation in the realm of actual things. Although pure difference is non-identifiable and is forever eluding the present, it underlies all identities and allows us to explain their actualizations, transformations and evolutions. The sense and significance that pure difference gives rise to involve incomparable events and movements that, for Deleuze, are uniquely significant to individuals. This pure difference that underlies all actual and trivial differences is objectified and excluded by representation. Representation cuts us off from the creativity afforded by virtual and intensive multiplicities.

Deleuze's opposition to identity is directed at the falsifying power and separative nature of identity in representation. Identity is opposed to the virtual intensities of pure difference in that these intensities are non-identifiable, unrepresentable, uncountable and not open to a reductive logical or mathematical analysis. Deleuze's critique of identity aims at correcting the mistake we make whenever we think merely in terms of actual things. In privileging identities and extended magnitudes we tend to overlook the intensive genesis of these identities and magnitudes. Identity works against and covers up the forces and virtual intensities of pure difference that are part of processes of becoming and transformation. Rather than existing as fixed and separate beings with identifiable and limited essences or predicates, all things are, according to Deleuze, connected to uncountable, non-identifiable and dynamic processes.

Deleuze does not deny that recognition occurs and that identity and

representation fulfil an important and necessary function. His answer however, is that thinking as well as communication is not only, or even primarily, a matter of identifying; it is in a crucial sense also expressive. "Its expressive momentum carries a charge of potential too great to be absorbed in any particular thing or event: too much to be born(e)" (Masumi 2006: xxxii). Although we represent what we think and talk about, a series of non-identifiable processes are always at work 'behind' that representation. For Deleuze, neither identity nor representation would've been possible without pure differences standing in the background as a condition for the illusory appearance of a pure, well-determined identity. Apart from the orderly, structured and representational way of our habitual thinking, there are always the chaos of chance happenings, and the irrationality and complexity of their ever-shifting origins and outcomes. We try to deal with the chaos and contradictory nature of pure difference by imposing structures, creating hierarchies, conceiving of things as 'the same' from one moment to the next, using definitions to limit meanings, and ignoring new and potentially creative experiences (James Williams in Parr: 2007).

In short: the traditional paradigm of thought is not able to think difference without objectifying and compromising it. "In it, difference turns into an object of recognition and representation, and is subsumed under similitude, opposition, analogy and identity" (Boundas 2006: 8). If we are to understand how to think and act in such a way as to make our lives intense and meaningful, and to understand and react to the intensity of our environments, we need to free ourselves from the mortifying and suffocating grip of representation. But what is thinking, in the Deleuzian sense, and how are we to accomplish it? To begin with we need to consider in more detail the conditions that allow for thinking *to take place*.

What are the conditions of thought?

Deleuze does not deny that recognition occurs but he wants to retain the name of thinking for a different, superior kind of activity. Thinking, for Deleuze, is the activity that takes place when the mind is provoked by an *encounter* with the unexpected, the unfamiliar or the unknown. To engender 'thinking' in thought is to encounter the condition for the possibility of common or habitual thoughts and opinions. If this is so, "then 'thinking' involves the instilling of aberration and movement into thought, or it brings this thought to the edge of chaos so that 'thinking' can indeed become creating" (Bell 2006: 13). Deleuze incessantly reminds us that we are never to confuse the condition with the conditioned. It would therefore be more accurate to say that engendering 'thinking' is to think the uncommon and non-identifiable condition for the possibility of every common and identifiable system.

While Descartes and Kant situate reason at the heart of their methods, Deleuze emphasises sensation and the power to be affected.

Sensation is a force of creative intensity that pulses through actual bodies or materials. Rather like Spinozist attribute of virtual extension, sensation is what *animates* the sensible (Hallward 2006: 106).

Deleuze develops his most important and influential arguments in *Difference and Repetition* with two main objectives in mind. Firstly, to show that there are things like sensations and virtual intensities that cannot be accounted for (or represented) in terms of actual identities. Secondly, to show that these sensations and intensities are the virtual but necessary conditions for the occurrence of significant events. Reality, therefore, has a double structure – that is, it never makes full sense to speak of the virtual without the actual or the reverse. The two sides of reality involve different, although interrelated things: sensations or virtual intensities on the one hand, and actual things on the other. Sensation is resistant to identification in terms of representation and thought must be open and responsive to sensations and intensities that go beyond the capacity of reason to represent them.

According to Deleuze, no thought is ever free of, or sequestered from sensation. In so far as sensation always extends to a multifarious network of further conditions and causes, the cogito cannot be self-evident. “A thought, such as the cogito, is ... inseparable from sensations that themselves bring a series of intensities ... to bear on the subject” (James Williams in Parr 2007: 49). Sensations, by arousing a memory, an image or the awareness of virtual Ideas and problems, provoke the mind to further action.

For Deleuze, it is problems or Ideas which are the specific objects of thought: they are that which can only be thought, yet remain in themselves empirically unthinkable (Patton 1996: 10).

In order to make sense of Deleuze’s understanding of the nature of philosophical thought, we need to look at his particular conception of a problem or Idea. Deleuze uses a capital ‘I’ to distinguish his concept of an Idea from our common, everyday understanding of ideas as any identifiable thought about some-*thing*. Ideas, according to Deleuze, are the transcendental condition for thought and that which vivifies and animates actual lives through forces or intensities.

The Deleuzian Ideas, in contrast to our common sense conception of ideas, are not contained in the mind. They are virtual relations between things and the condition for transformations and changes in actual things and actual ideas. Deleuze’s concept of the Idea has to do with something that flows, something in movement that cannot be known since it does not have any fixed identity. Belonging to the dimension of the virtual, the Idea

can only be *sensed* and it can only be known partially as it is expressed. Since its elements are pure differences that cannot be identified, the Idea is necessarily resistant to identification as an object of knowledge. For Deleuze, the Idea can only be deduced on the basis of sensations and affections.

Furthermore, the virtual 'being' of Deleuze's Ideas is that of problem-setting matrices. The virtual does not resemble the actual, just as problems neither resemble nor represent their eventual solutions. Whereas representation belongs essentially to consciousness and is fashioned according to the logic of solutions, the Idea, on the contrary, is 'sub-representative' and follows the logic of questions and problems (Boundas 2006).

Problems are not cognitive or logical – that is, they cannot be solved or classified according to a logical treatment or according to what we know to be the case. That is why he [Deleuze] relates them to the complex theme, defined as a ghostly idea resistant to treatment as a thing that can be designated or as a set of propositions susceptible to logical analysis. ... Problems cannot be answered satisfactorily or solved by propositions. ... Instead, a problem is an attribute of the genesis of the act of thought ... [W]hen thinking emerges and changes, it is necessarily accompanied by problems (Williams 2005: 130).

After having defined problems as the differential, virtual structures that are the necessary, transcendental conditions of thought, Deleuze suggests that problems are of the order of events (Patton 1996). In the same way that problems and questions are not reducible and limited to the particular solutions in which they become incarnated, events subsist independently of their actualisations in bodies and states of affairs.

In *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze regards sense and what he calls 'pure events' as being identical. "The event occurring in a state of affairs and the sense inhering in the proposition are the same entity" (Deleuze 2004: 209). Pure events, for Deleuze, are incorporeal entities which are expressed in language and which subsist over and above their spatio-temporal manifestations.

Sense is the fourth dimension of the proposition. The Stoics discovered it along with the event: sense, *the expressed of the proposition*, is an incorporeal, complex, and irreducible entity, at the surface of things, a pure event which inheres or subsists in the proposition (Deleuze 2004: 22).

The Stoic concept of the 'sayable' (*lekta*) allows Deleuze to distinguish the sense or event expressed in a proposition from the mixtures of bodies to which these are attributed (Patton 1996). Furthermore, the Stoic understanding of events as incorporeal transformations that are expressed in propositions enables a new conception of the relationship between language and the world in terms of effectivity rather than representation.

Language does not simply represent the world and states of affairs; in so far as language expresses such incorporeal transformations, it also acts upon it or intervenes in it in special ways (Patton 1996). A full explanation of an event must include a consideration of the virtual and of the actual and, more importantly, of the ways in which actual states of affairs touch on virtual events (Williams 2003).

The interconnections among Ideas, problems and events in Deleuze's account of the transcendental conditions of thought demand a radically different conception of philosophy away from representation. In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze (1994), in collaboration with Guattari, describes philosophy as the art of forming, inventing and fabricating concepts. Like works of art (and unlike scientific theories), philosophical concepts do not refer to objects or states of affairs outside themselves. Rather, they are auto-poetic, self-organising entities; they are defined not by their referential relations to things or states of affairs but by the relations between their elements as well as their relations to other concepts. Concepts participate in a multiplicity of virtual relations with other concepts that constitute their 'becomings.'

In this context, the term 'becomings' refers to the particular paths along which a concept might be transformed into something else (Patton 1996). For Deleuze, the philosopher's superior task is to create concepts that express and thereby bring into consciousness significant or important events.

Every concept shapes and reshapes the event in its own way. The greatness of a philosophy is measured by the nature of the events to which its concepts summon us or that it enables us to release in concepts (Gilles Deleuze in Patton 1996: 13 & 14).

Of primary importance in Deleuze's theory of difference is the question of our stance towards the events that befall us. Philosophy, as the art of creating concepts, is therefore serving an ethical rather than an epistemological purpose. I shall conclude this paper with a few remarks on the ethical implications of Deleuze's philosophy of difference.

An ethics of the event

Deleuze is of the view that morality, along with traditional or dogmatic philosophy has been dominated by a representational 'image of thought.' That is, the image of the rational mind that synthesizes its received sensations to constitute a stable, recognizable object; the mind that harmonizes its actions with the minds of others to become the man of 'good sense' and 'common sense.' In view of Deleuze's philosophy of difference, we need to accept the possibility that thought varies according to the image it has of itself. If this is so, then we should also consider the possibility

announced in *Difference and Repetition* of 'thought without an image.' In other words, if we accept the possibility that today, we think and act in a certain way because we have this image of the rational mind as the locus of thinking, then we should also consider what thinking, acting and creating without such an image would be like (Colebrook 2006).

The concept of 'thought without an image' finds an important place in Deleuze's ethics, which resolves to get rid of the transcendental *ought*, along with its twin fortifications of obligation and duty. In the place of morality, which is founded on a representational 'image of thought', Deleuze proposes an ethics of the *event*; an ethics, that is, with *intensity* as its only foundation. Such an ethics, built on intensity, is defined by Deleuze as life, rendering itself worthy of the *event* (Boundas 2006). But what is an ethics of the *event* and what does it mean to become worthy of the *event*? It is impossible for us to engage in an extensive discussion of these questions right now. In what follows I shall attempt to summarise what I find to be the most important aspects of Deleuze's ethics.

Intensity and intensification will be capable of delivering us from morality based on representation, only after they have freed themselves from subjectivity and from all objectal coordinates or ensembles. In this regard, Deleuze's understanding of desire is informative. In contrast to the psychoanalytical concept of desire as belonging to a subject and being directed at an object, Deleuze conceives of desire as a process. Instead of setting up a 'lack' as its mode (and then seeking an object to fill this lack), desire unrolls a plane of consistency or a field of immanence. To put this differently, desire in the Deleuzian sense, doesn't belong to a subject and it is not directed toward an object. On the contrary, desire is only attained at the point where someone is no longer searching for or grasping an object any more than he grasps himself as a subject (Boundas 2006). What needs to be reduced, in other words, is the self on its way to becoming-imperceptible.

This is the kind of becoming that carries with it its own pre-personal and pre-subjective intensities – the 'affects', that is, intensities, modifications and expressions of our power to be – the *vis existendi* of Spinoza's *conatus* and Deleuze's desire (Boundas 2006: 15).

Once this reduction is done, desire will be able to assert itself as the creative and original *energeia* of life. Desire, in Deleuze's work, is not a source of phantasms; it does not originate, once again, from an image based on objectification and representation. Rather, Deleuzian desire is virtual and indistinguishable from its object.

Whereas virtual or creative desire is immediately productive of its object and thus lacks nothing, desire [in the psychoanalytical sense] is castrated when it is configured as desire *for* an object and *of* a subject. At the same

time that desire is detached from its object, its subject becomes the subject of this lack (Hallward 2006: 67 & 68).

In so far as Deleuzian desire is not defined by the intentionality of a subject 'wanting to have' – the subject of such a lack - it is capable of producing connections and relations that are real and that are regenerating in their rhizomatic multiplicity. Following Spinoza, Deleuze conceives of desire as an act that is enhanced by joy and that facilitates the formation of adequate ideas. Desire, in this sense, is the striving towards more and better encounters (Boundas 2006).

In his distinction between good and bad encounters, Deleuze stays clear of the measuring rod of transcendent norms and values. Rather, encounters are being evaluated in terms of their ability to invigorate the power to be. "There are never any criteria other than the tenor of existence, the intensification of life" (Gilles Deleuze in Boundas 2006: 16). The 'intensification of life' and the 'tenor of existence' are, however, capable of grounding an ethics of joy or desire only in so far as they are calibrated according to their alliance with the virtual. It is in the light of this that we need to reach a better understanding of Deleuze's claim that ethics must be an ethics of the *event* - that is, an ethics of the virtual.

Events, for Deleuze, are not reducible to actual bodies or states of affairs. For this reason, we need to insert between events and states of affairs, a process of 'counter-actualisation'; "it is this process that reveals the true meaning of 'becoming worthy of the event' – the spinal cord of Deleuze's ethics" (Boundas 2006: 17). It is the *counter-actualisation* of the actual that empowers the inherent virtual or pure event to be thought and willed. And to 'become worthy of the event', then, means to discover ways of aligning ourselves with the creative processes that work through us. Or to put this differently, in order to affirm the unlimited creative power of the virtual, we need to dissolve whatever might restrict its flow and expression. For Deleuze, the most serious and persistent obstacle to creation is posed by the reactive fiction of a thinking self or subject.

Personality, identity, subjectivity, consciousness, signification: these are our primary obstacles. An adequate vehicle for creation must therefore become: impersonal or anonymous; unconscious, or asignificant ... (Hallward 2006: 91).

Ethics, in this sense, is a question of willing the event in such a manner or to such an extent that the quality of the will itself is transformed and becomes affirmation. "As far as actual thinkers are concerned, then, absolute or unconditional affirmation is again always a matter of being-affirmed or being-infused. To think is to allow thought to work through us" (Hallward 2006: 137).

This transmutation in the quality of the will is achieved by means of the concept and it is in this sense, that the creation of concepts is redemptive, liberating and ultimately transformative. Philosophy, for Deleuze, is the discipline through which creative events can be expressed in pure thought. Conceptual creations are always independent of the actual configuration of situations and the work of philosophy is precisely to extract a concept from the circumstances of its actualisation.

[P]hilosophy posits a new, still virtual world as the counter-actualised correlate of creation itself. ... A redemptive philosophy will therefore seek to demonstrate, after Leibniz, that 'everything has a concept!', or in other words, that only the singular 'individual exists and it is by virtue of the power of the concept: monad or soul'. (Hallward 2006: 142).

Conclusion

Deleuzian ethics concerns *encounters* and *relations* instead of representations, and the moral law or moral judgements (such as in Kantianism) are replaced with an ethos of 'living the good life' (such as in Stoicism). Each encounter is an intensive rapture; an intoxication of souls and bodies, and it involves a struggle, a contest and an exchange of forces: one is wounded, transformed and changed for one is struck by, or infused with that which exceeds representation, affecting one's very constitution. In contrast with morality which acts as a set of 'constraining' rules (e.g. a moral code), ethics evaluates what we do, say or think according to the immanent mode of existence that it implies. If one says or does this (thinks or feels that), what mode of existence does it imply?

Being torn from the context of representation, ethical conduct becomes rather problematic. How does one proceed if one wishes to 'live the good life'? An ethics of the event or the encounter is not concerned with duty and obligation, for these questions are directed to hypothetical situations. An ethics of the event, on the other hand, explores the virtual forces and intensities that inhere in real situations. For, Deleuze insists, one does not choose one's problems, they are given to one in the forces that one encounters. Thus, ethics proceeds from a certain kind of impotence or (im)potentiality at the very heart of conduct namely, the power to be affected. If one is not affected by an encounter, then one cannot enter into a relation with the other encountered.

Furthermore, the problem of ethical conduct in the Deleuzian sense is finding an appropriate response; that is, expressing the forces that are present in a specific encounter or event. Insofar as the 'just deed' cannot be represented, there are no principles or guidelines of good conduct except for provisional, local and possibly questionable ones. One cannot try to be moral, for ethical conduct begins, precisely, when one reaches the limits of

one's power to be; when one faces the problem of finding the appropriate response to a given situation or encounter. Since each encounter affects the singular and discrete individual in a way that exceeds representation (and that cannot be anticipated), all action is ultimately beyond measure. Only when this problematic is modestly accepted, can ethical conduct begin; only then can one discover ways to turn sad passions into active and affirmative joys.

Deleuzian philosophy is an ethics of the event insofar as it attempts to rediscover the mediating infinite in the finite: one can only regain the infinite if one is able to extract the virtual event from an actual state of affairs. In this way, encounters become problems for thought. Insofar as an experience of the infinite in the event or encounter presents us with novelty, it exceeds representation. This raw experience actualizes an idea that is unfettered by prior categories, thus forcing us to invent new ways of thinking in the form of concepts. Philosophy, in this sense, is intensive; it expresses the virtual existence of an event in thought. And therefore, the destiny of philosophical positions and philosophical concepts lie not with the truth or the falsity of their claims but with the horizons for thinking and living they open up for us. In short: it is not the extension and expansion of our knowledge that is of concern, but of perception, of opening up new ways of seeing the world and our existence within it.

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