

Deleuze on Virtuality

Deleuze's concept of the virtual is related to ontology. In *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze clarifies:

"We opposed the virtual and the real: although it could not have been more precise before now, this terminology must be corrected. The virtual is opposed not to the real but to the actual. The virtual is fully real in so far as it is virtual. Exactly what Proust said of states of resonance must be said of the virtual: 'Real without being actual, ideal without being abstract'; and symbolic without being fictional. Indeed, the virtual must be defined as strictly a part of the real object— as though the object had one part of itself in the virtual into which it plunged as though into an objective dimension... The reality of the virtual consists of the differential elements along with singular points which correspond to them. The reality of the virtual is structure. We must avoid giving the elements and relations which form a structure an actuality which they do not have, and withdrawing from them a reality which they have. We have seen that a double process of reciprocal determination and complete determination defined that reality: far from being undetermined, the virtual is completely determined. When it is claimed that works of art are immersed in a virtuality, what is being invoked is not some confused determination but the completely determined structure formed by its genetic differential elements, its 'virtual' or 'embryonic' elements. (DR, 208-209)"

Excerpt from the entry "Deleuze" by Daniel Smith and John Protevi, in SEP at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/deleuze/> (2012)

In *Bergsonism* (1966), Deleuze develops the ideas of virtuality and multiplicity that will serve as the backbone of his later work. From Maimon's reading of Kant, we know that Deleuze needs to substitute the notion of the condition of the genesis of the real for the notion of conditions of possibility of representational knowledge. The positive name for that genetic condition is the virtual, which Deleuze adopts from the following Bergsonian argument. The notion of the possible, Bergson holds in *Creative Evolution*, is derived from a false problem that confuses the "more" with the "less" and ignores differences in kind; there is not less but more in the idea of the possible than in the real, just as there is more in the idea of nonbeing than in that of being, or more in the idea of disorder than in that of order. When we think of the possible as somehow "pre-existing" the real, we think of the real, then we add to it the negation of its existence, and then we project the "image" of the possible into the past. We then reverse the procedure and think of the real as something more than possible, that is, as the possible with existence added to it. We then say that the possible has been "realized" in the real. By contrast, Deleuze will reject the notion of the possible in favor of that of the virtual. Rather than awaiting realization, the virtual is fully real; what happens in genesis is that the virtual is actualized.

The fundamental characteristic of the virtual, that which means it must be actualized rather than realized, is its differential makeup. Deleuze always held the critical axiom that the ground cannot resemble that which it grounds; he constantly critiques the "tracing" operation by which identities in real experience are said to be conditioned by identities in the transcendental. For instance, Deleuze criticizes Kant for copying the transcendental field in the image of the empirical field. That is, empirical experience is personal, identitarian and centripetal; there is a central focus, the subject, in which all our experiences are tagged as belonging to us. Kant says this empirical identity is only possible if we can posit the Transcendental Unity of Apperception, that is, the possibility of adding "I think" to all our judgments. Instead of this smuggled-in or "traced" identity, Deleuze will want to have the transcendental field be differential. Deleuze still wants to work back from experience, but since the condition cannot resemble the conditioned, and since the empirical is personal and individuated, the transcendental must be impersonal and pre-individual. The virtual is the condition for real experience, but it has no identity; identities of the subject and the object are products of processes that resolve, integrate, or actualize (the three terms are synonymous for Deleuze) a differential field. The Deleuzean virtual is thus not the condition of possibility of any rational experience, but the condition of genesis of real experience.

[...]

What is that difference? Difference is difference in degrees of "power"; in interpreting this term we must distinguish the two French words *puissance* and *pouvoir*. In social terms, *puissance* is immanent power, power to act rather than power to dominate another; we could say that *puissance* is *praxis* (in which equals clash or act together) rather than *poiesis* (in which others are matter to be formed by the command of a superior, a sense of transcendent power that matches what *pouvoir* indicates for Deleuze). In the most general terms Deleuze develops throughout his career, *puissance* is the ability to affect and to be affected, to form assemblages or consistencies, that is, to form emergent unities that nonetheless respect the heterogeneity of their components. (Here we see the empiricist theme of the "externality of relations": in an assemblage or consistency, the "becoming" or relation of the terms attains its own independent ontological status. In Deleuze's favorite example, the wasp and orchid create a "becoming" or symbiotic emergent unit.)