

Deleuze's Image of Thought

by Sven Nilsen, 2025

In this paper, I discuss what Gilles Deleuze is talking about in his chapter "Image of Thought" in his work "Difference and Repetition" (1968). I argue that he is analyzing the dogmatic image of thought, but without making important contributions to the empirical side of philosophy. Deleuze's ideas in this chapter might be thought of as in the tradition of post-Kantian philosophy, in contrast to Hegel. Many philosophers use Hegel as their target while trying subconsciously to surpass Charles Darwin. Therefore, Deleuze is not repairing the divide between practical and self-imposed abstract philosophy, but making the difference more apparent, hence more painful, a problem largely invented by the post-Kantian tradition. I suggest that Deleuze, like most other modern philosophers, do not realize that the dispute between dogmatism and empiricism is about practice of medicine, which was intrinsically religious and political at the time of Kant. Finally, I make some analysis of Deleuze's Image of Thought from a path semantical perspective.

Gilles Deleuze is a difficult philosopher to read. A common reason philosophers are difficult to read, is because they do not actually write about specific events in the world. They write as if they are participating in an intellectual culture, where the goal is to contribute with new ideas.

One could say the same about 2nd century Early Christians working within the neo-Platonic school of thought. I imagine if I could use a time machine and go back and interview them, that they too would claim they are participating in an intellectual culture, where the goal is to contribute with new ideas. However, from our point of view today, what these people write about seems mostly religious nonsense, that frequently takes a satirical tone.

The problem is that this is how philosophy has been practiced from its inception. People write texts that become read again and again and commented on, using new texts that comments on previous texts etc. ad infinitum. In one sense, there is no concept of time moving forward in these texts, but rather a progression of ideas. This is how historians keep track of these texts, because they know when certain texts are published and can retrace the influence over time from a given text and back on historical events.

However, what most modern people miss when reading such texts from the past, is that there is a cultural intellectual milieu around practice of medicine. The disagreements around practice of medicine has resulted in disputes that took on both religious and political themes. Which means, philosophy in this sense can not be thought of as an isolated activity from contemporary culture. The same practice of people reading and writing texts of non-historical things can be seen as a continuous tradition of thought back to the ancient world that is not making discontinuous leaps other than rejecting previous ideas that were also popular among intellectuals. The actual progress happens in the physical world, where people improve instruments, diagnoses and experiments.

When somebody finds a new animal species in the world, this is something that people in general do not think will influence philosophy. Except that it does. When the platypus animal was discovered in Australia, it defied several previous categories that biologists used to classify animals, such as mammals and reptiles. This is the concept in the book "Kant and the Platypus" by Umberto Eco (1997). Now, this does not mean that it became a problem for biology, nor for most people in general. It is used mainly as a philosophical argument of how ideas are formed and how reality can make us surprised. Actually, the surprise itself requires a rigid perspective.

Another example are black swans. Most swans are white, but there exist some black swans too.

There is no big deal or a problem by finding a black swan in nature. Sure, it makes headlines and biologists raise their eyebrows, but this is not something that puts a huge obstacle in the way for most people. What philosophers do over and over, is to use examples which are not problems at all and elevate them to a kind of “divine” status, where the non-problem becomes seen as a problem.

When does a non-problem becomes seen as a problem? It happens when the non-problem is seen as a metaphor for human thought. With other words, philosophers make up problems for humans to think about. However, these problems do not require any specific solution, because they are not talking about any actual events in particular. The reader is supposed to see it as a problem, because this is what their impression of philosophy is. Their audience is expected to be impressed.

Hence, how philosophy is practiced is that it generates a kind of religious ecstasy in their respective audiences, which makes them comment and reflect upon a new idea. When people get tired of an idea, some among them with an eye for opportunity rejects the idea and replaces the old idea with a new one, repeating the cycle of competition for which philosopher is most popular at the moment.

Now, you see the problem with the principle of progressing by contributing with new ideas. The older ideas that people were impressed by before, fades out of the cultural collective consciousness until they gets resurfaced when some philosopher gets tired by the popular ideas. This effect can create a seemingly progression of ideas, because from one perspective, old ideas get replaced by new ideas, but it can also be circular by replacing new ideas with old ideas.

This means that nobody actually knows what philosophy means of what it is supposed to do. People write about whatever impresses their contemporaries. After two millennia, there are many works that seems horribly outdated from our perspective. Until somebody finds a new way to interpret these works so they yet again become relevant.

It is important to recognize that this is how philosophy has always been practiced. New discoveries, like using a parabolic equation to describe freely falling bodies by Galileo, sparked interest only because it rejected Aristotle’s model of using two straight lines: One up diagonal motion followed by a vertical line. Aristotle’s model seems to work well for objects that meet a lot of resistance in the air, but it works less well for things with a heavy mass, e.g. rocks. The understanding of air as a separate element of physical forces in which absence all things would follow approximately parabolic motion, was a precursor to Kepler’s planetary elliptic orbits and Newton’s law of gravity.

These things might seem not very philosophical oriented at first, but upon closer examination, Galileo’s experiments are precisely designed to reject Aristotle’s teachings. This means that Aristotle gets a kind of cultural frame upon which ideas are discussed for intellectuals.

Now, you can see that somebody might design a physical experiment to settle a dispute, that some intellectuals read and argue about from older texts, providing commentary and trying to come up with their own ideas. It is the written language that primarily drives this development. The nature of the experiments themselves are given just an afterthought, because the whole purpose is to test an idea, not to let some experiment bring people new ideas.

This was how philosophy was practiced, until people turned designing experiments into an art, where the experiments started to outrun the pace of philosophy. Since then, philosophy has slowed and retreated from experiments, which brings us thinkers like Deleuze that are hard to read.

Like I said before, the primary reason that philosophers like Deleuze are hard to read, is because they do not write about particular events in the real world. They continue the same tradition of trying to contribute new ideas, but these ideas are not tied up to something concrete and specific.

Deleuze claims that Kant performs an early empirical analysis of human thought in "Critique of Pure Reason" (1781), but redacts and hides this analysis in later versions. This causes the post-Kantian tradition to learn toward abstract rationalism than empiricism. Yet, Kant himself argues that he is trying solve the problem of unifying rationalism and empiricism.

This problem of unifying rationalism and empiricism is something that Kant invents. He turns a non-problem into a problem. The actual underground debate is between dogmatism and empiricism. Why? For the simple reason that dogmatism and empiricism are schools of medicine. These terms are given modern interpretations independent of their context of medicine practice. The rational post-Kantian tradition is an attempt to absorb ideas from the empirical practice of medicine into dogmatic practice of medicine and hiding this plagiarism under a new label of rationalism. The rationalists insert themselves as champions in their own made up dispute and fabricate their own historical origin in Decartes.

In reality, most empirical scientists did not even know about much of the post-Kantian philosophical tradition. Hegel's works was not read by many in England. John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart is one of the first who engages with Hegel. He is born 35 years after Hegel's death.

Today, Hegel is considered the philosophy who peaks the post-Kantian tradition, from which it branches into several directions that influences the entire modern Western philosophy. The problem is that historically, the empiricists could not have debated rationalists a lot, since they probably did not know about them. They do not know who Hegel is. On the other hand, everybody knows who Charles Darwin is, long before Hegel's work get translated into English.

Charles Darwin is a philosopher in the empiric tradition. Yet, few modern philosophers think about him as one, because the post-Kantian tradition has claimed their hold on philosophical history. However, this is simply a false fabrication of history. What happened was that Erasmus Darwin, the grandfather of Charles Darwin, might have influenced Kant, alongside Hume and other authors. Kant gets celebrated as a big philosopher, by copying ideas from Darwin or other people, because the church on the continental Europe bans Academia from using these books in their writings.

The fact that Charles Darwin get much more famous and stirs controversy in a much higher degree than Hegel, indicates that the distribution of Hegel's works is precisely an attempt to overcome Darwin's influence. Hence, this is why Darwin does not get referred to as a philosopher today.

This is why when Deleuze writes the chapter "Image of Thought" in his book "Difference and Repetition", he is only able to comment on the empirical analysis that Kant does in the first version of "Critique of Pure Reason". He can not mention Charles Darwin's works directly. The only thing Deleuze can do is to say what little there is to say about Kant's empirical analysis. Which is a non-problem that Deleuze turns into a problem.

You can see the same mechanism here as in the rest of the philosophical tradition. The whole point is to reject previously popular ideas by introducing new ones, using the method of turning a non-problem into a problem. There has to be some prior philosopher who proposed the old ideas in order for people to pay attention to the new idea. People who are not seen as philosophers do not get even to be rejected in these circles of intellectuals, because this does not impress their contemporaries.

When Deleuzes writes this chapter, it is almost impossible to tell what he is talking about. Yet, if you are in these philosophical circles, then you are expected to be impressed by it. You are not expected to be impressed by the clarity and ability to convince that empirical science produces. Philosophers only look at instances of observations in the natural world as long it gives them some way to turn a non-problem into a problem, lifting it up into a metaphor for the philosophical activity.

The source of the way of separating people into philosophers and non-philosophers, favoring some people while discriminating others, comes from the difference in practice of medicine. The Dogmatic school of medicine put more weight on traditional teachings. The Empiric school of medicine put more weight on controlled experiments. The Methodist school of medicine put more weight on heuristic rules. Philosophy has always been closely related to various schools of medicine. These different ways of practicing medicine resulted in the division of two camps of philosophy. One, that got so ashamed of calling themselves philosophers, that they simply called themselves scientists instead. Second, that claimed more and more of the historical tradition of philosophy, until people stopped thinking about scientists as philosophers. The Methodist school just vanished into obscurity, in many ways fueling various religious fundamental churches.

Deleuze does not attempt to repair the divide between dogmatism and empiricism. What he does is to go back to the start of the post-Kantian tradition and pointing out the difference. This difference becomes more painful. It does not get fixed, because there are none empirical non-philosophers that get recognized by Deleuze as philosophers. Hence, Deleuze is not able to make important contributions to the empirical side of philosophy. He is still stuck in the same camp.

However, on the side of dogmatism, Deleuze makes the following contribution: A proposition in the sense of the dogmatic image of thought consists of two layers. One which is the propositional content. This is the set of logical consequences that arises from assuming some proposition. The second layer is the Idea.

Deleuze thinks that an Idea is a problem for which there exists no solution. Just like the non-problems that philosophers turn into problems by giving them metaphorical interpretations with respect to the philosophical activity. New ideas replace old ideas, because people get tired of thinking too much about the same set of problems. There is no progress in solutions, because the whole point is to comment and reject old ideas that are currently popular, so contemporary philosophers pay more attention to the new ideas. The new idea can be an old idea that most people have forgotten.

From perspective of mathematical language design, there is a way to progress on Deleuze's Idea. An Inside theory is a language where an unknown is a sentence in some grammar. An Outside theory is a language with at least one symbol which is intrinsically unknown. This means, Deleuze's Idea in the sense of Inside theory requires either an over-constraint problem or insufficient grammar. To make Deleuze's Idea give meaning, it can be interpreted as an object in Outside theory. This is possible, because as long an Idea has a symbol in it which is intrinsically unknown, any theory which the Idea contains is also an Outside theory.

Now, the propositional content of some proposition is naturally Inside theory. This means, the dogmatic image of thought can be seen as a synthesis between Inside and Outside theory.

In Joker Calculus, the philosophy of Inside theory is Seshatic Platonism. The philosophy of Outside theory is Platonic Seshatism. A synthesis between Inside and Outside theory might therefore be thought of as some language bias $\text{'L' (Seshatic Platonism, Platonic Seshatism)}$ where 'L' is some predicate returning an expression in Joker Calculus that depends on both arguments.

In my opinion, this form of synthesis is less elegant than just using Joker Calculus in general. I believe Deleuze fits in the post-Kantian tradition of philosophy. Just like the others in this tradition, their work usually have some language bias that can be described by expressions in Joker Calculus.

On the other hand, there is not much to say about what Deleuze contributes to the empirical side of philosophy. No new non-philosophers are mentioned and Charles Darwin is overlooked, as usual.