

ON THE PRESENCE OF BERGSON IN DELEUZE'S NIETZSCHE

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Gilles Deleuze's early years were occupied by a number of studies on individual figures belonging to the history of Western philosophy and literature, a move that he later interpreted as the attempt to give voice to a "minor tradition." This minor tradition included, in sequence, Hume, Nietzsche, Bergson, Spinoza, and Kafka. As any reader of Deleuze knows very well, the nature of Deleuze's relation with each of these authors is anything but critical neutrality and commitment to comprehensive explanation. Deleuze isolates a specific instance of each thinker and exposes it to a process of transvaluation, by which it becomes a crucial operator in his own conceptual system. Because each of these sources becomes integral part of Deleuze's philosophical apparatus, it is crucial to comprehend them not only separately but jointly, as they act upon one another.

My objective in this essay is to question the most commonly accepted interpretation of the Nietzsche-Bergson sequence within Deleuze's minor tradition. Deleuze's best known study on Bergson, *Bergsonism*,¹ came out in 1966, which is four years later than his volume on *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, published in 1962. At least from a chronological point of view, it would then seem that Nietzsche's influence on Deleuze precedes that of Bergson, and not the reverse. I wish to question this point. Not only chronologically Deleuze encounters Bergson before Nietzsche, but in my reading, his interpretation of Nietzsche remains deeply influenced by Bergson. In the following pages, I am going to elaborate this position by focusing on a much earlier essay than *Bergsonism*, still unpublished in English, entitled "La conception de la différence chez Bergson,"² of which *Bergsonism* is an expansion and more elegant presentation. My interest in this essay is precisely that of accessing Deleuze's

not-yet-Nietzschean reading of Bergson, which will allow me to show how ontologically indebted to Bergson is his reading of Nietzsche.³

While working on the essay on Bergson in the mid-50s, Deleuze had already committed to his life-long crusade against what he came to see as the fundamental "negativity" permeating the dialectical branch of the rationalist tradition, codified by Hegel. Such a negativity brings philosophy to entertain, in Deleuze's terms, a generic or external relationship with things, instead of a positive, that is, concrete or internal relationship with them.⁴ Bergson's gift to philosophy is, in Deleuze's perspective, to have articulated the possibility of such a positive relationship thanks to the notion of "internal difference." I wish to suggest that this Bergsonian pair, external-internal, is at the core of the tension that Deleuze will later identify as Nietzsche's own gift to philosophy: the tension between reactive and active forces. And it is on this same basis that the Nietzschean notion of affirmation is interpreted by Deleuze through the lens of Bergsonian duration and virtuality.

Let me begin by explaining the external-internal pair in relation to the notion of difference. Dialectical thought, Deleuze suggests, has fundamentally misinterpreted identity. For Hegel specifically—but the claim extends to the Cartesian and even Platonic brand of rationalism at large—the difference between one entity and another, what allows us to identify it, is established in contrast to what it is not. Why is this difference "external" to the entity in question or the properties that make it up? Because difference is unnecessarily translated into negation. In Hegel's terms, it is only via the universal that the particular becomes accessible to knowledge, the universal being the

negation of the particular. Subsuming difference under negation is, thus, the major mistake Deleuze imputes to the dialectical tradition. It is the detour through negation that keeps the dialectical conception of difference "external" to difference itself, or difference in kind. If we want to reach difference in kind, we cannot address the entities and their properties externally, by negatively comparing them to all others, but internally, that is, by asking what are the "things themselves" rather than what they are not.⁵

Tendencies and Composites

What are the "things themselves"? In the 1956 essay, Deleuze spends a lot of time on this aspect of Bergsonian metaphysics. Things are not self-contained substances, independent of time and becoming, but "phases" of becoming itself. In other words, a thing is not the effect of a cause but the expression of a "tendency." A tendency is a phase of becoming. Is there a correspondence between a thing and a tendency? Not a one-to-one correspondence, because things are composites (*des mixtes*) of at least two tendencies. A tendency can express itself only insofar as it is acted upon by another tendency and, therefore, tendencies never come isolated from one another but always in pairs. I will show in a moment how these Bergsonian tendencies have the same structure of Nietzschean forces.

Bergson encourages us, writes Deleuze, "to address not the presence of characters, but the tendency they have to develop them."⁶ When we describe a thing we usually group together set of properties. This is a mistake. We should focus on the emerging properties, or rather the tendency that a thing has to develop some properties or characters. It is these which differ in kind; their expressions, that is, the things and their properties, differ only in degree or intensity.⁷ Internal difference does not describe difference among things, but difference among the very tendencies that the individual thing brings to a certain degree of expression. What the dialectical tradition has interpreted as dif-

ference in kind is in fact only difference of degree.

As it is true for the concept of force, which is conceivable only in relation to at least another force, tendencies come in pairs. All tendencies are predications of a fundamental pair, defined by Bergson as time and space, or the subjective order and the objective order. Subjective and objective mean, in Bergson's framework, that we can look at things either from the point of view of the transforming power of time, or duration, or from the point of view of simultaneity and juxtaposition, or space. But it is always a comparative stance, never an absolute one. Time and space are profoundly a-symmetrical orders in the ontological sense, because they represent the irreducible pair of tendencies alongside which things develop their properties, and in the epistemological sense, because time and space embody the two available ways of knowing the world: the first investigates the world from the stance of its endless becoming-other than itself, in terms of what I call the transformative power of time; the second, takes the world as the "space" in which the relations between entities can be analyzed as from without their own duration, as if they were simply juxtaposed in space. Separating out the tendencies means to intuit that at the bottom there is just difference and not identity. This is what Deleuze means by difference in kind or internal difference. The faculty that allows us to separate them is intuition. "Intuition presents itself as a differentiating or separating method: separating composites into two tendencies."⁸

In the 1956 essay, Deleuze does not elaborate on the nature of this intuition, which clearly emerges in Bergsonism as "thinking in terms of duration."⁹ He simply says that it is a different mode of thinking than the analytical or "spatial" mode, where objects or set of properties are opposed and juxtaposed to each other as in an homogeneous "space." Intuition operates at a level in which things, as composites of tendencies, qualitatively vary in time.

"The originality of the Bergsonian conception is to have shown that internal difference

does not need to get to contradiction, alterity or negation, because these three notions are either less deep than internal difference itself, or at least points of view on it taken from without it."¹⁰ Bergson's conception of difference is inscribed in a vitalistic model which allows him to expose difference "from within." Such a model implies envisioning tendencies as nothing determinate, but as endless generators of difference. Tendencies work like biological organisms: "alteration is substance."¹¹ Another term Deleuze uses for tendencies is articulations, and more specifically, articulations of the real. Bergsonian tendencies are the invisible articulations of the real because the real is never still, but proceeds by constantly differentiating itself according to virtual lines that push it forward.

The philosophy of Bergson enjoyed such a tremendous popularity amongst the artistic avant-gardes of the first two decades of the century that art critics began to refer to a certain "use" of Bergsonian themes by artists as Bergsonism. The elements of Bergsonian philosophy that artists and writers such as Marcel Proust and Braque mainly focused on, included the transformative role of time, namely, the way in which time, as movement, modifies our description of the world around us. It is interesting that Deleuze entitles his major work on Bergson *Bergsonism* but never discusses the actual artistic tendency. I take this to be an implicit reference to the specific theme that Deleuze extracts from Bergson and transvaluates in his own conceptual framework. The theme of duration and becoming, of *time in its transformative function*, is what Deleuze imports from Bergson into Nietzsche.

If we look at reality as a set of empirical "facts," lending themselves to being juxtaposed in space, we do not capture everything that is going on but only a crystallized snapshot.

The assimilation of time into space, makes us think that the whole is given, even if only in principle, even if only in the eyes of God. . . . Time is only there now as a screen that hides the

eternal from us, or that shows us successively what a God or a super-human intelligence would see in a single glance. Now this illusion is inevitable as soon as we spatialize time.¹²

"Spatializing time" means looking at the world as if it were still. Such a spatialization kills all the life that the world has in it. This is the function of what Deleuze identifies as the "reactive" forces in Nietzsche's philosophy. On the contrary, if we re-infuse the world with duration, it would regain movement and appear as what it is: a constantly transforming whole, a whole in a state of becoming-other than what it is. This "injection" of duration, or becoming, is the role of active forces.

The tendencies, or forces, do not represent a possibility that may or may not become real. They are already located within reality, except that they have not yet actualized, or expressed themselves. This is the point where we encounter what Deleuze cherishes most of Bergson: his translation of the traditional distinction between real and possible into the distinction between actual and virtual. The tendencies that Bergson takes to be the building blocks of his ontology are not understood as possibilities but as virtualities. A possibility may or may not become reality. Whereas the Bergsonian tendencies are completely real, as say, the DNA is real. However, all the properties that it entails are not actual but virtual.

Bergson considers the identification of the category of virtuality as distinct from possibility a necessary revision of the framework provided by traditional ontology. Deleuze considers it the main gift made by Bergson to philosophy. I suggest that Bergson calls "the virtuality of the tendencies" what Nietzsche calls "the affirmation of the forces."

Duration, or the virtual, is thus a qualitative continuum that allows degrees of contraction at one end and expansion at the other. At its most expanded end, duration is matter, at its most contracted is memory, or spirit.

Forces at War

Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche is profoundly Bergsonian because it is Bergson's notion of duration which provides Deleuze with a key to Nietzschean affirmation, as the recognition and subversive use of the transformative power of time.

As I tried to unravel Deleuze's interpretation of duration in his early not-yet-Nietzschean essay on Bergson, I will now briefly turn to his analysis of affirmation in Nietzsche.

I take from Michael Hardt the general standpoint that, in the transition from Bergson to Nietzsche, Deleuze's interest shifts from the ontological realm to the social-historical perspective. This is proved by the massive change in terminology that his encounter with Nietzsche brings about. Tendencies become forces, and eventually powers, not in the codified sense of *pouvoir*, but in the unstructured and vitalistic pressure of a *puissance*. The purely differential conceptual pair external-internal translates into an antagonistic one: that between reactive and active. And finally the ontological category of virtuality, which, for Bergson, means the world as affected by pure temporality, or duration, is reborn as the *selective* principle of affirmation.¹³

The first step of this cross-fertilization has Bergsonian tendencies literally become Nietzschean forces. "The object itself is force, expression of a force."¹⁴ As objects for Bergson were composites, mixtures of a number of tendencies, in Deleuze's Nietzsche they are expression of forces. The difference between tendencies and forces, which marks the passage from the ontological to the social-historical perspective and opens the possibility of affirmation as a selective function, is that forces are antagonistic to each other. In addition to coming in differentiated pairs, like tendencies, they form a multiplicity which is not the Many as multiplication of the One, but an irreducible plurality.

Deleuze is careful to point out that Nietzsche does not conceive such a plurality in an atomistic sense. "Atomism attempts to impart

to matter an essential plurality and distance which in fact belongs only to force."¹⁵ Nietzsche's critique of atomism is that precisely this distance, the separateness between one atom and the other, is the differential element by which each force relates to the other.

Furthermore, the relational and antagonistic character of forces allows for their connection to the notion of will. "The will (will to power) is the differential element of force . . . in its relation with the other the force which makes itself obeyed does not deny the other or that which is not, it affirms its own difference and enjoys this difference. The negative is not present in the essence as that from which force draws its activity."¹⁶ What Deleuze wants to stress is that a stronger force does not exercise its power for the sake of negating a weaker force but only for the sake of affirming its difference. The differential of power between weaker and stronger is what Nietzsche, in Deleuze's reading, calls the will. The stronger the power of a force, the stronger the will, the stronger the desire to impose itself as pure difference.

It should be stressed that this is a controversial point for all the interpreters of Nietzsche's will to power, for the issue of the affirmation of stronger forces can be looked at from two standpoints. The first is the "victimistic" stance which the weaker player in the game embraces if she looks at the stronger player's victory as a declaration of supremacy for its own sake. The second is the "egomaniac" stance which the stronger player embraces if she looks reductively at her own victory as a simple reassurance of her own superiority.

In his interpretation, Deleuze seems to seek a third and more satisfactory solution, which he identifies, once again, with the notion of difference. In his eyes, the affirmation of stronger forces can elude both the victimistic and egomaniac alternatives if we conceive of the will to power and its affirmation as a selective device. From Deleuze's angle, the stronger player experiences her victory not as the reassurance of her superiority but as the affirmation of her difference, her absolute individual-

ity. The will to power can be thus interpreted as a will to difference, a device that selects the stronger from the weaker forces only insofar as the former are differentiating forces and the latter are homogenizing ones.

This psychological dramatization of forces in terms of will allows Nietzsche to articulate a similar alternative to negation as Bergson's internal difference. Unlike Bergsonian tendencies, Nietzschean forces strive; but similarly to tendencies, they strive to affirm (and not impose) their differential of power, that is, their will. Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche's will to power seems to be modeled after the Bergsonian notion of internal difference or difference in kind, precisely because, in Deleuze's Nietzsche, power eludes all implications of supremacy, acquisition, and accumulation and is conceived as difference for its own sake. In both cases, it is a notion of difference that is diametrically opposed to the Hegelian assimilation of difference to negation, an assimilation that Deleuze has objected against forcefully throughout his life.

"Forces have quantity, but they also have quality which corresponds to their difference in quantity: the qualities of force are called "active" and "reactive."¹⁷ Active forces are the

more powerful, reactive forces are the weaker ones. More power means more willing to affirm one's difference. Affirmation is a selective experience aimed at the retrieval and activation of only those forces which are difference-sensitive, forces whose will is to affirm themselves in their own difference, and not by virtue of negating some other will. Affirmation is a selective device aimed at expelling the negative, because negation is external to difference itself. "An affirmative thought is a thought which affirms life and the will to life, a thought which finally expels the whole of the negative."¹⁸

Life is activity: the power of transformation, the Dionysian power, is the primary definition of activity. Like Bergsonian duration, Nietzschean affirmation puts great emphasis on transformation. The world is not just what it is objectively, namely, a set of actualities. But is also a multiplicity of virtual tendencies, in a constant state of becoming. While Bergsonian duration stops here, at the contemplation of the transformative power of time, Nietzschean affirmation is a project of the activation of such a power. And this activation is both a creation and a creative process.

ENDNOTES

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (Zone Books, 1988, 1968), translated by H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam
2. Gilles Deleuze, "La conception de la différence chez Bergson," *Les Etudes Bergsoniennes* 4 (1956): 77-112. Since there is no published English edition of this essay, I am responsible for the translation of all the excerpts appearing in this text.
3. Michael Hardt is about the only critic who has devoted some attention to this early essay. See M. Hardt, *An Apprenticeship In Philosophy: Gille Deleuze* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). However, my take on reversing the sequence Nietzsche-Bergson backwards to Bergson-Nietzsche is in contrast to his reading on the role of Bergson in Deleuze's Nietzsche. Hardt limits Deleuze's use of transvaluation of Bergson to the ontological dimension, and seems to believe, like I do, that the ontological dimension does not filter through the political-ethical dimension that he correctly links to Nietzsche. Gillian Rose, in the chapter titled "The New Bergsonism," in her book *Dialectics of Nihilism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), pp. 87-108, is the other critic who emphasizes the Bergsonian element in Deleuze, in relation to the Kantian antinomy of law, elaborating the notion "ontological injustice."
4. Deleuze, "La conception," p. 80.
5. Deleuze begins the essays on difference in Bergson using this very Husserlian expression. "Bergsonism is going to bring a great contribution to the philosophy of difference. Such a philosophy always plays on two levels, the methodological and the ontological ones. It is a question of determining the differences in kind be-

tween the things: it is only this way that we will be able to “come back (*revenir*) to things themselves, to describe (*rendre compte*) them without reducing them to other things, to know them in their being” (“La conception” p. 79).

6. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
7. This point is deeply problematic, and needs to be reformulated in terms of degree of difference rather than difference in degree. Let me explain why. Deleuze says that while the tendencies differ in kind, their expressions, or the composites—either mental states or states of affairs—differ in degree or intensity among each other. What does it mean “differing in degree”? This is one of the most complicated and possibly confused passages of the 1956 essay. However, it is one of the points of Bergsonian metaphysics that will become central to Deleuze’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s notion of affirmation in connection with the transforming power of time. I think that the confusion, on Deleuze’s part this time, mainly stems from the expression “difference in degree.” Degrees are usually assumed to be units of measurement. If composites indicate the degree of expression of tendencies, the tendencies themselves become the scale for the degrees. But if tendencies are what Bergson says they are, successions of qualitative states irreducible to quantification, then the expression “difference in degree” does not make much sense. How can a tendency, which cannot be quantified because it is heterogeneous within itself, act as an homogeneous scale of measurement divisible in degrees?

Occasionally in the 1956 essay and more steadily in *Bergsonism*, Deleuze defines composites with an inverted formulation: not difference in degree but degree of difference. The effect of this metonymy is a crucial one and fits much better what composites are supposed to be. It is unclear to me why Deleuze does not stick to it. If I say degrees of difference, degrees have difference as a scale of measurement, which may be a paradoxical expression but describes coherently what composites are for Bergson. If considered as degrees of difference, that is of tendencies, composites would then enjoy the same properties of the tendencies. This

clarification helps solve the “Platonic question,” which most critics of Bergson see him protracting: the question of dualism. It is a matter of fact that Bergson’s thought, like the very dialectical tradition that Deleuze attacks, is interspersed with dualisms: duration-space, quality-quantity, heterogeneous-homogeneous, memory-matter. One could claim that Plato too intends to divide composites into two halves, essence and appearance. The difference is that he takes sides. Worldly entities are nothing but different degrees of ontological intensity, measured against the absolute Good. In other words, the two halves are defined on an absolute scale of degree between perfection and nothingness. How does Bergson avoid taking sides? Deleuze’s answer is: by locating the qualitative change, and therefore all the differences in kind, on one side of the dualism, the side of duration. What I take Deleuze to mean here is that by recognizing the tendencies as different in kind, and yet interdependent on the basis of their very “internal” difference, the possibility of any kind of absolute scale, being it metaphysical, moral, or aesthetic, is eliminated.

8. Deleuze, “La conception,” p. 85.
9. Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, p. 31.
10. Deleuze, “La conception,” p. 90.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
12. Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, p. 104.
13. In this framework, the vitalistic character of Deleuze’s Nietzsche, and more specifically the notion of life in which it is anchored, represents an interesting exception to the more general social-historicization of Bergsonian ontology that takes place as Deleuze meets Nietzsche in 1962. The absence of the vitalistic theme from the 1956 essay, and its presence in *Bergsonism*, proves that vitalism is one of the authentically Nietzschean themes, that evades the influence of Bergson in Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche.
14. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, trans. XX (Place: Publisher, 19XX), p. 6.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

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