At the margins of Sense: The Function of Paradox in Deleuze and Wittgenstein

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An essential incompatibility

It would seem that there is no point of contact between the two philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Ludwig Wittgenstein. There are many, stated and implicit, reasons for Wittgenstein’s absence in Deleuze’s large collection of philosophical and literary interlocutors. In the television interview he gave with his friend Claire Parnet, *L’Abécédaire*, Deleuze famously refers to Wittgensteinians as a destructive philosophical school, but he does not elaborate further on what this destructiveness consists in or amounts to.

Deleuze’s interest in the philosophical themes presented by English or American writers of modern fiction, such as Fitzgerald or Lawrence, and his philosophical reading of Lewis Carroll in *The Logic of Sense*, made these authors attractive to him in his ongoing search for a philosophical position that would lie outside of both common sense rationalism and Christian metaphysical idealism. The Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein was adopted into the family of British and American philosophers for similar reasons of pointing to an attractive alternative to current philosophical conventions. His later philosophy has thus been explored as offering an escape from certain kinds of scientific or metaphysical rationalism: logical positivism, Cartesian philosophy of the subject, foundationalism in general.

Now Deleuze did not find, indeed could not have found, ideas or philosophical motives in Wittgenstein that could serve his own project. There are three principal reasons for this.

Wittgenstein’s later philosophy is structured around an ambivalence between pragmatism and foundationalism. Kripke’s interpretation of Wittgenstein’s scepticism emphasises the foundationalist strand. Cora Diamond’s therapeutic Wittgenstein, as well as the earlier Oxford Wittgenstein of Baker and Hacker, is a pragmatist and an anti-foundationalist. Neither of these philosophical programmes, the search for ways of refuting scepticism, the endeavour to dissolve all philosophical questions as resulting from false problems or the elaboration of a transcendental pragmatism, have any resonance in Deleuze’s philosophy.

Second, Deleuze is a systematic metaphysical philosopher in the tradition of pre-Kantian rationalism, the tradition of Spinoza, Leibniz and their ancient predecessors. Wittgenstein suggests in his later work that the very idea of metaphysical rationalism is based on an erroneous interpretation of what language means, and could mean. The attempt to construct concepts that are not grounded in the meaning of words as they are used within some already existing pragmatic context is doomed to fail, according to Wittgenstein, since only existing linguistic practice can provide meaning for the words we use, even if these words are apparently conceptual and abstract.

For Deleuze, any such pragmatic-sceptical self-limitation of thought’s capabilities on the grounds of existing practice flies in the face of aesthetic experience. The revolutionary aspirations on behalf of language demonstrated by surrealist poetry and other avant-garde literary movements offer philosophy an insight that was only partly available to Greek philosophers – it may be hinted at in Empedocles and Heraclitus – it is the insight that human language as well as ordinary experience are limited by self-imposed norms of simplification.
Deleuze uses the very difficult and technically complex term ‘representation’ to sum up these norms. Under the spell of representation, thought never lives up to its potential, but poetic language may reveal a realm of thought that lies beyond representation – without thereby being a transcendent or mystical realm. It is merely a realm of what is thinkable but not representable.

A third, perhaps more interesting reason for the incompatibility of Deleuze and Wittgenstein – a reason that is interesting also in the context of this collection of papers – is of a literary nature. Deleuze explicitly upholds modern literature as a locus of philosophical innovation. Yet his own style is dry and anti-literary. It is sober, free of rhetorical flourishes, whether professorial or poetic.

Deleuze’s works written with Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus especially, can be seen as works of philosophical literature, adopting a style that is close to that of American poets such as Allen Ginsberg, but these joint works are very different in tone from Deleuze’s own. When the collaboration with Guattari ceased and Deleuze wrote the two-volume treatise on cinema, his style returns to an academic dry concision in the first volume, whereas the second volume infuses the academic style with a meditative tone, motivated by the greater open-endedness of the subject matter, the time-image. Yet, stylistically both volumes remain inconspicuous. The texts by Deleuze that many would find most beautiful, his short book on Kant and his study of Bacon, derive their effect from mathematical principles of construction and a laconic, even austere, manner of exposition.

It would seem then that there is no possible contact or dialogue between the two philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Deleuze showed in all the stages of his philosophy an interest in the concept of signs. In The Logic of Sense and in A Thousand Plateaus, he develops original theories of language. Yet none of these theories and concepts exercise a function that is in any way comparable to the role that the philosophy of language plays in Wittgenstein’s thought. The central question of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, the question that divides the interpreters of his work into different schools, is the relationship evoked above between pragmatism and foundationalism: if the basis of mathematics, language and thought is a certain kind of ‘rule-following’, and if philosophy’s aspiration to construct foundations beyond the practice of rule-following is an illness, then Wittgenstein presents a universal transcendental pragmatism (like Kant he both justifies existing epistemic practices and sanctions a condemnation of practices that are only apparently epistemic). On the other hand, the immense ingenuity with which he searches for justifications and – at the same time – demonstrates the failure of any such search presents a problem of scepticism and hence a more real problem of foundationalism than the pragmatic interpretation of his thought would suggest. Now, neither the transcendental pragmatism of Wittgenstein nor his foundationalist skepticism find any resonance in the philosophy of Deleuze who is a speculative metaphysical philosopher.

Deleuze claims the right for philosophy to bracket the Kantian epistemological injunction against metaphysics. For Deleuze metaphysics is an immediate given, in the way that sense data or mathematical reasoning are presented as given in British empiricism. Metaphysics is given in philosophy, according to Deleuze, in the form of concepts. These concepts contribute to the construction of philosophical systems. The status of a philosophical system is different from that of a scientific theory in that a system does not merely consist in a series of statements about a particular domain of reality. Concepts embody an applicability that cannot be hedged in by any prior definition of the theoretical domain they are determined to apply to.

Metaphysics is thus not a philosophical discipline that one would gain access to only after a preliminary epistemological exercise. Metaphysical concepts do not gain value only after having passed some epistemological test. It is rather the case that philosophy is in essence metaphysical. Hence, the raw material of philosophy is the concept since there is nothing that is given to or within philosophy that would be more basic or more immediate than the concept. This conception of philosophy that Deleuze and Guattari present in What is Philosophy? is also practised in Deleuze’s own philosophical treatises. The concept is theorised in his early book on Nietzsche, in Difference and Repetition and in The Logic of Sense is a treatise on being, language and ethics written in parallel to Difference and Repetition, which is a treatise on being and thought.

The problem of language always presents itself within a speculative metaphysical context for Deleuze. Concepts and theories of language do not serve to question the legitimacy of that metaphysical context. For Wittgenstein concepts are, on the other hand, words used outside of and beyond the legitimizing space of their original context of use within an existing linguistic practice. This is the main difference between the philosophy of language in Deleuze and the philosophy of Wittgenstein. All that I will go on to say will be said against this background.

**Wittgenstein and Humour**

Wittgenstein’s sceptical search for ultimate justifications of rule-following employs a sophisticated rhetoric of paradox. Jokes, puzzles, thought experiments challenge the enquiring mind to step outside of its habitual frame of reference and conventions of thought. If we use the term paradox to describe this whole rhetorical practice, we can say that paradox in Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations serves to propel thought beyond the limits that it imposes on itself through its own habits of reasoning. This challenge is made in the name of reason all the same, in the name of a philosophical and sceptical reason. The nature of this philosophical reason is elusive in Wittgenstein, since it is difficult to judge the role of sceptical questioning in his text: is it driven by a search for ultimate foundations – a traditional rational philosophical enterprise – or is scepticism a kind of therapy or pedagogy offered for his readers to teach them the futility of any philosophical search for foundations? If one pays close attention to Wittgenstein’s humour and literary style one finds in his paradoxes an explosive force that is quite far removed from the somewhat pedantic, puerile or merely conventional thought experiments that philosophers often present. This explosive force is embedded in a point of view that is, to be sure, unfailingly directed towards rule-following, everyday life, the ordinary. Yet the point of view itself, animated as it is by the explosive force of paradox, makes the ordinary extraordinary. I do not intend to suggest that Wittgenstein’s paradoxes are like conceptual artworks, they are not simply aiming to instil in the reader a sense of displacement or alienation in relation to his or her own habits of thought. The purpose of paradox is always guided by the sceptical problem. If one looks more closely at paradox itself one finds that it presents a puzzle that
enlarges the context of discourse. The argument or story does not simply move towards its conclusion, but a small break occurs and it is not immediately clear what context is required to give a solution to the puzzle.

Whereas a live metaphor opens a horizon of meaning that is not completely determined or settled, a paradox opens a context that is not immediately defined. This is interesting in relation to Wittgenstein’s pragmatism. If rule-following is a self-sufficient and self-sustaining practice, how is it then dependent on context? Wittgenstein’s aesthetic ascetic paradoxes stage stylised situations in which the dense web of social and linguistic interaction that we observe in daily life has been replaced by slightly absurd and certainly comical performances. When such an interaction occurs in daily life it is comic. I once entered a sandwich shop in England. A tall quiet man, without a word handed me a piece of paper on which was written the German word ‘Lieblingsfarbe’ (favourite colour). He then said: does this mean love? (Liebe=love) He had assumed that I was German and wanted to clarify the meaning of this word. The comic effect of the situation arose from a change in context: I didn’t know the man, we were in a shop where one would normally exchange sandwiches for money, not linguistic information. The gesture of handing over a piece of paper with one word written on it as in a code, seemed a parody of a spy film. When everyday life appears staged in this way, the conventional context has been broken.

Wittgenstein as Writer

Wittgenstein is of course an Austrian writer as well as a philosopher. His preface to the *Tractatus* and his *Vermischte Bemerkungen* are works of short prose that can be compared, for instance to Canetti. Given the appropriation of Wittgenstein by the powerful school, or schools, of Analytic Philosophy, attempts to integrate considerations of style into a philosophical appreciation of his work would inevitably be situated in relation to the interpretative canon of that movement. The hermeneutically sophisticated approach of Glock grounded in the study of Wittgenstein’s Nachlass, thus takes as its starting point questions concerning his manner of thinking, of elaborating problems, writing down solutions to a problem in a string of variations on the same theme. The hermeneutic task of understanding this method of variation certainly takes aspects of Wittgenstein’s mode of writing into consideration but the end-point of understanding is to explicate this method as a type of philosophical analysis, as in his recent book co-edited with John Hyman: *Wittgenstein and Analytical Philosophy* (Glock/Hyman 2009).

Wittgenstein’s use of paradox in the *Philosophical Investigations* does not on the other hand seem entirely reducible to the schema of a method of variation in the service of analysis. Rather, Wittgenstein considers paradox as an instrument of thought that contains a certain force or violence in relation to common sense and philosophical convention. The paradox is a thought form that explodes in the field of received opinion and opens a field of something that remains to be thought, but that is not yet articulated as a precise problem. We can say, of course, that ultimately Wittgenstein hopes to formulate the puzzle identified by the paradox as a problem and then analyse the problem, but the textual moment of the paradox, its manifestation on the page is a literary phenomenon in its own right, resistant to what may or may not be the philosopher’s own intentions. This literary moment does not only have the quality of provoking thought in a certain way, it is also intangible, self-contained, enveloped around its own humorous effect. It is very odd that Wittgenstein scholars have had so little to say about the relationship between his sense of humour and that of a near contemporary such as Kafka. Both stage scenarios of grotesque encounters that seem to rattle our most deeply held certainties and the beliefs that guide our everyday life. Of course, Kafka’s style is objective as well as hyperbolical, lending to these grotesque encounters a forceful dramatic vivacity. Wittgenstein’s style of humour is obviously more understated and bemused. The grotesque is not dramatic but cerebral. His encounters are minimalistic rather than enlarged.

The suggestion of a comparison with Kafka is still helpful for differentiating Wittgenstein’s paradoxes, and the humour they express, from the purely philosophical thought experiments presented at the opening of Kripke’s book on Wittgenstein. I personally find it funny to imagine someone who thinks that all numbers above a certain size, when added, yield the result 57 (but I must also admit that I need to be in a somewhat nerdy mood to appreciate the hilarity of that idea). In other words, there are thought experiments that may well introduce puzzles and problems, indicate that there are areas of thought that have not yet been explored by philosophy, and thus coax the reader into a certain attitude of reflection and perhaps scepticism. But Wittgenstein’s paradoxes do more than this. They are not merely instruments of reflection; their effect is not easily or immediately identifiable.

In the opening sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* we are often faced with the shadowy presence of a Stranger, an Intruder or Observer, someone unfamiliar with our ways, insisting on being shown what we mean, or inversely obtrusively insisting on his own understanding of our practice. This figure never acquires a body and a name, yet his impact on the philosophical situations described in each aphorism is akin to that of an observer in Baudelaire’s prose poems, a figure whose strangeness serves to highlight the comic nature of normality. At this point there is of course a certain aesthetic resonance between Deleuze’s admiration for Lewis Carroll and surrealism on the one hand and Wittgenstein’s own poetic sensibility and sense of humour on the other.

Deleuze and Philosophy

It could here be tempting to pursue this parallel by comparing the status and function of puzzles in Wittgenstein to the philosophical theory of *problems* in Deleuze. There are several reasons why we might resist that temptation. First it is difficult to compare a theory and a practice. Wittgenstein does not propose a theory of puzzles, but demonstrates through the use of puzzles certain difficulties of thought that arise both within conventional philosophical methods and within common sense experience, difficulties that stem from a sort of anthropological instinct towards giving abstract names to features of linguistic practice that, in fact, do not possess an independent existence, in the mind or in the world.

Deleuze never exemplifies or practices his mathematically based theory of philosophical problems. He illustrates and invites us to illustrate what problems might be through examples from the history of philosophy — and as a historian of philosophy Deleuze is unparalleled: his readings are subtle, systematic, and conceptually concrete. As is well known, his technique is taken from his predecessors, Goldschmidt,
Deleuze and Semiotics

Deleuze showed in all the stages of his philosophy an interest in the concept of signs. In The Logic of Sense and in Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze develops original theories of language as a type of being (sense) and as a social activity.

In his early semiotics Deleuze follows the stoics and Hobbes in thinking of signs universally as natural phenomena: anything can be a sign for something else, the scar is a sign of the wound that it precedes, the cloud is a sign of the rain that may come. This is the notion of signs as a primary problematisation that emerges from a philosophical system. This continuum presupposes that philosophy is rationally neutral, that is, neutral with respect to the distinction between discourses that lay claim to be rational and adhere to some specific rational norm of justification and discourses that are indifferent to problems of rational self-justification. This neutrality in Deleuze’s philosophy runs very deep and characterises his entire enterprise. Wittgenstein, for all his poetic sensibility and veneration for literature would not endorse such a principle of neutrality, I think.

Third, language is never for Deleuze an instrument that self-consciously aims at lucidity, clarification, analysis, simplification and the like. Like the Stoics, Deleuze thinks of language as a particular kind of being. To explore further the metaphysical incompatibility between Wittgenstein and Deleuze we should look for a moment at Deleuze’s conception of language and signification.

From Sense to non-sense

In the course of The Logic of Sense, the moving point of non-sense gradually acquires the status of a strategic concept with which Deleuze proposes a dialectic of meaning and meaninglessness, sense and non-sense. This is quite straightforwardly Hegelian: in order for something to be what it is it must have borders, for the border to be drawn it must be conceivable that there is something on the other side of the border, and we must be able to conceive what this is. What is inside the border is negatively dependent on what is outside the border. From a Hegelian perspective this is merely an initial move. It is Hegel’s task to demonstrate how the opposition of sense and non-sense is a framework within which the original identity of the concept of sense is negated in an arrow of development. In Deleuze’s case, the identity of sense is negated in an arrow of differentiation, an arrow of multiplicity, an arrow of becoming. The strategy of Heidegger is to individuate the movement of sense by tracing it back to the archetypal model of the creative act of Dasein. In Deleuze, sense is individuated not by a temporally constrained movement but by a spatially constrained movement. For Deleuze this movement is physical, figural, and analogical, it is a movement away from a central point of identity. Sense is a way of constituting identity, and Deleuze’s arrows move in an opposite direction: away from identity. In this sense, sense constitutes itself as what is outside the limits of Deleuze’s arrows. From sense to non-sense is an arrow of development, and non-sense is a type of being that is outside the limits of Deleuze’s arrows. Sense is an arrow of development, it is a movement away from identity. Non-sense is a type of being that is outside the limits of Deleuze’s arrows.
on what is outside the border. It is what it is by not being what it is not. Yet non-sense does not simply determine sense in this somewhat crude dialectic of the border. The visual metaphors that Deleuze uses to specify the agency of non-sense do not suggest a movement of determination or constitution of identity.

This is because sense is not primarily word-meaning, possessing an identity in the manner of an essence or a phenomenological noema. The being of sense is itself a non-being – it has being but the quality of this being is a kind of non-being. This category is modelled on the Stoic sayable that is not entirely part of the causally determined order of the cosmos. Deleuze says that it subsists rather than exists.

Sense gains specification, becomes intentional, conceptual, referential meaning through a process of differentiation and for this process to be operative non-sense is required we are told – but why should this be so? This is so because non-sense is intrinsically undetermined and hence only defined in relation to sense, but the relation it has to sense is itself not fixed but constantly changing, since precisely non-sense itself does not have fixed limits. At each moment of the genesis of sense intention, concept, reference, the specification of sense has its ultimate limit in the limitless element of non-sense. Hence when I say love, or I love you, or you are beautiful or something of the kind my intention is carried into language by the possibility of saying UVIOL. UVIOL is of course a phonetic anagram of ‘I love you’ but it could also be an SMS saying: you are like a viol, hinting at Annie’s character being similar to that musical instrument. The paradox is here a possibility that displays a genetic origin. The minimal possibility of sense is not identical with the fully-fledged, completed realisation of sense within empirical communication.

Hence Deleuze searches for an origin of sense that is not identical with communication as it appears in everyday life, or as Husserl would say, in the natural attitude. The equivalent of a phenomenological reduction in Deleuze does not serve to lay bare a realm of constitution where the basic entities of thought acquire their essence, but to reveal a process of genetic constitution within language, a process that is alive within language-use as well as within its transcendental genetic possibility. In other words this is a genetic conception of language that sees the genetic process as being followed through into the existence of that which it generates and thereby constitutes.

This process is determined by non-sense paradoxes because only the possibility of irreducible self-reference, and non-sensical ambiguity, reveal that hard kernel of language in which sense has not yet become communication. Non-sense is that element of language in which it displays a nature prior to the concrete unfolding of language as everyday communication.

The parallel between the constitution of being as difference – as exposed in Difference and Repetition – and the constitution of sense through non-sense – in The Logic of Sense - lies in this search for a level of genetic constitution which is both transcendental and separated from the level of manifest existence – of being or of language since the things that are constituted do not 'look like' the genetic process – but which at the same time is present in actual being or language as a genetic principle.

In manifest empirical existence things appear within complex relationships, but these relationships may not be the key to understanding their origin. The level of constitution is not on the other hand simply arbitrarily different from the level of manifest existence. Rather it is organised around the primary element of being which is the self-differentiating genetic force from which the universe, and in parallel, thought and language acquire multiplicity.
Notes

1. I have referred to Ludwig Wittgenstein, Werke I (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980) for the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus and the Philosophische Untersuchungen (Philosophical Investigations).


