**Chapter 3:**

**Deleuze, Plato, and the Paradox of Sense**

In the last chapter, we saw how paradoxico-criticism, committed to a rigorous thinking of the paradoxical limits of totality, developed from the initial conventionalism of Saussure's theory of language as a system of differences to a far-reaching critical reflection on the totality of language, or of the world, or of Being itself. In this chapter, we shall see how the early works of Gilles Deleuze take this same problematic a step further. Tracing the paradoxes of limits as they are reflected in the everydayness of language that proposes and also deposes them, Deleuze's thought discerns the contradictory and paradoxical as the originary dimension of the a-subjective and pre-personal production of sense and phenomena. The central operations of this production arise from the scission between a totality and itself that results from its own internal reflection. These are operations at the boundaries that demonstrate the strict *in-closure* of any total regime of meaning or force, and in *The Logic of Sense* and *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze shows how the paradoxical structure of sense underlying both meaningful and meaningless language supports, and also undermines, the coherence of any such regime. On this basis, Deleuze develops a theory of the Platonic Idea which, though it owes nothing to "Platonism" traditionally conceived, nevertheless plausibly captures the very formal relationship which Plato calls "participation." This yields a structurally radical and new resolution of the problem of the *nomothesis*, or of the force and effectiveness of language and institutions, and makes way for what Deleuze calls the "power of a new politics" capable of originating revolutionary transformations of thought and action.

**Structure and the Paradox of Sense**

In an exemplary article from 1967 called "How do we recognize structuralism?", Deleuze enumerates a series of criteria or common features definitive of structuralism and the structuralist movement.[1] The first of these criteria, according to Deleuze, is the recognition of a specific domain or order of "signification," completely distinct from both the orders of the real and the imaginary. This recognition, Deleuze notes, provides for a dramatic and even revolutionary advance beyond the methods of classical philosophy, as well as the nineteenth and early twentieth century movements of Romanticism, Symbolism, and Surrealism, which attempt to comprehend the Real as such but see it as in relation to imagination and the imaginary. According to Deleuze, structuralism, by contrast, discerns in language and signification a "third regime," wholly distinct from the real as such but also distinct from the imaginary and its "games

---

[1] Deleuze (1967).

of mirroring, of duplication, of reversed identification and projection, always in the mode of the double";[2] it is at the point of the sign and its action that we can now discern something like the "transcendent point where the real and the imaginary interpenetrate and unite."[3] Most decisively, Saussure's conception of language as a system of pure differences allows for a conception of meaning as grounded, neither wholly in the reality of things nor in the resemblances of the imagination, but rather in a structure that "has no relationship with a sensible form, nor with a figure of the imagination, nor with an intelligible essence."[4] That is, the discovery of the order of signification, and its articulation of language as a system of pure differences, allows us to see the foundations of meaning in an order that has *nothing to do* with resemblance, mimesis, or the representation of a pre-existing order of things or concepts. The sign is, rather, split between signifier and signified, between the order of things on one side and the order of concepts on the other, and the recognition of its differential structure provides a profound new insight into the paradoxical point that defines and conditions both orders. It is in this way that the specific discovery of the structure of language by Saussure provides a vast new project for thought, and a radically transformed arena for theoretical work.[5]

Two years later, in *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze turns to the theorization of the structural basis of language, which Deleuze now calls "sense." Sense, as Deleuze emphasizes in the opening sections of the book, is both the *result* of the structural deployment of signs in speech and, equally, the *pre-condition* for the total structure of signs, a kind of original dimension of language that is presupposed by all of its functions and cannot be understood simply in terms of any one of them. As such a condition, sense is whatever underlies and determines the stable directional relations of definition, inference, and reference that signs bear to each other and to things in the world. At the same time, though, sense for Deleuze *also* underlies the *instability* of meaning and, even more generally, the phenomena of change, flux, and becoming. Indeed, because of this bivalent tendency to underlie both stability and instability, both being and becoming, sense cannot be understood, Deleuze insists, as simply opposed to nonsense, conceived as that which is simply outside the possibility of sense. Rather, sense moves in "both directions at once," both toward the constitution of a full, determinate meaning, and simultaneously toward the dispersal and

---

[2] Deleuze (1967), p. 172.

[3] Deleuze (1967), p. 171.

[4] Deleuze (1967), p. 173.

[5] As we saw in the last chapter, this discovery of a regime of constitution that underlies the meaning of propositions and words but *owes nothing to imagination or resemblance* might indeed be seen as one of the most transformative and significant outcomes of the philosophical turn to language in the twentieth century, in both its structuralist and its analytic versions.

dissolution of any such meaning in contradiction and nonsense, with which it bears a special and "specific" internal relation.[6]

Through a remarkable reading of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, Deleuze argues that this bi-directionality is essential for understanding change and becoming.   In fact, as Deleuze argues, paradoxical sense, conceived as the domain of a "pure becoming," or a category of "pure events," is the constitutive basis all kinds of change, transformation, and manifestation.  For instance, as Alice becomes taller than she was before, she is also smaller than she will be.   At the same moment, and in relation to her becoming, she is thus characterized by contradictory predicates, and this contradictoriness demonstrates an *essential* bivocality or opposition at the root of becoming that is inherent to all becoming and change as such.[7]  The paradox, which was already suggested by Plato, demonstrates, as well, the more general relation of sense as such to the paradoxes that characterize the appearance and manifestation of language.  Bidirectional sense itself thus exists in an original relationship of sense to what is classically determined as its "other," the nonsense of paradoxes, contradiction, word-play, and the unlimited reversals of pure becoming, as eminently demonstrated in the plays, ruses, and adventures, often genuinely undecidable between the sense of narration and the nonsense of pure language, that make up the strange "substance" of Alice's adventures.

Given this bi-directional character, sense is para-doxical in the original meaning of the term (that is, as running "contrary" to opinion or doxa).  It is only subsequently that its sense can be rendered uni-directional by the orthodoxies of what Deleuze calls "good sense" and "common sense."   In particular, whereas *good sense* "affirms that in all things there is a determinable sense or direction," *common* sense distils from this ostensibly determinable direction the assignation of stable identities, the identification of substances and subjects as the bearers of fixed names and determinate properties.  However, in its original articulation of sense as such, "paradox is …that which destroys good sense as the only direction, but it is also that which destroys common sense as the assignation of fixed identities."[8]  This original articulation is, moreover, deeply linked to the problematic of language and its limits.  Thus, "It is language which fixes the limits (the moment, for example, at which … excess begins), but it is language as well which transcends the limits and restores them to the infinite equivalence of an unlimited becoming."[9]  It is, in other words, language as a totality of possible signification that determines sense as unidirectional

---

[6] Deleuze (1969) (henceforth: *LofS*), p. 77, p. 68.

[7] *LofS*, p. 1.

[8] *LofS*, p. 3.

[9] *LofS*, pp. 2-3.

meaning or reference to being; but this linguistic determination and staging of sense also evinces sense as the condition for a transcendence of the specific limits of language in the excessive dimension that again allows an unlimited affirmation of bidirectional becoming.

Deleuze proceeds to characterize this "excessive" and original dimension of sense through a series of specific paradoxes that demonstrate how it underlies (though it is distinct from) the denotative, deictic, and significative (or inferential and propositional) dimensions of language as it is ordinarily spoken. First, there is the paradox of inference already given by Lewis Carroll in his dialogue "What the Tortoise Said to Achilles" in 1895 (see chapter 2, above).[10] As we have seen, this paradox appears to show that the application of the logical rule involved in the most ordinary chains of reasoning cannot be justified, on pain of a bottomless infinite regress of justifications. Deleuze concludes that the ascent from the proposition, as conditioned by its logical relations, to its underlying logical conditions will never have a finite end; it is therefore necessary either simply to affirm the irreducibility of this paradox or to affirm sense as a constitutive dimension of the "unconditioned" which halts the regress and provides an ultimate foundation for the possibility of significative meaning. Thus there is, as a fundamental and constitutive feature of linguistic meaning, an essential *gap* between rules and their application that must apparently result from *any* attempt to found language in the unity of a complete system of logical laws.

The second paradox of sense concerns the conditions for possible denotation or nomination, and is given, again, by Lewis Carroll, this time in a brief passage in chapter 8 of *Through the Looking-Glass*. In this passage, Alice discusses songs, names, and the names of names with the White Knight. Here, in response to each of Alice's successive questions about the name of an entity, the Knight is able to provide another, completely distinct name; the paradox is that if everything real has a name, and if no name can name itself, then the provision of any real name for anything will demand a name for *that* name, and so forth. The assumption of the nameability of any real entity thus leads to an infinite proliferation of names, or to the necessity of the assumption of an infinite possible extensibility of the power of linguistic naming.

In this form, the paradox might be thought relatively unproblematic: we might readily agree, for instance, that language bears within itself an infinitely extensible power of possible naming, or that there could *possibly* be an infinite number of names, without supposing that all of these names must be provided on any actual occasion of linguistic use or description. However, if we add the assumption that each name, in order to possess its denotational function, must be endowed with an intelligible sense or meaning, the

---

[10] Carroll (1895). This is the same paradox to which Quine appeals in arguing against Carnap's logical conventionalism (see chapter 3 above).

paradox of regress becomes a more fundamental and devastating one.[11] For on this assumption, each name is endowed with *something* – a sense -- which is *responsible for its being able to be used* to name what it does (or is what we understand when we know what it names). Thus, it ought to be possible in case of *any* use of a name to designate its sense, and then it must be possible to ask after the sense of *this* designation, and so forth. Here, the problem is not just that of an infinite possible extension of designations, but a bottomless regress of *conditions* for intelligible use, each of which must apparently be satisfied by another. If we cannot block the regress, then the meaningful use of any term presupposes not only the possible existence, but also knowledge and reality of, an infinite chain of conditions. The regress thus testifies not only to the "infinite power of language" but, seemingly, to the irreducible infinity of the *knowledge* or *competence* involved in, and presupposed by, the most ordinary use of any name.

Finally, Deleuze develops this paradox of naming and designation, under the condition of Saussure's structuralist picture of the sign as the unity of signifier and signified, into a third paradox of alternation or of the signifier-signified relation itself. In particular, conceived in terms of structuralism, the paradox of regress we have just considered shows the necessity of an ongoing *alternation* between signifiers and signifieds, whereby the signification of a signified results in the production of a new signifier, which may then itself be treated as an designated (signified) entity, to be named again by a new signifier, and so on. As Deleuze argues, this alternation has a basic and fundamental significance for our underlying conception of the basis of language (thought as composed of the two systems of signifiers and signifieds). For absent any other principle of coordination, and given the avowed "arbitrariness" of the link between the signifier and the signified in any individual sign, to assert the infinite alternation demonstrated in the course of the paradox is in fact the *only* way in which it is possible to assert a systematic relation between the level of the signifiers and the level of the signified at all. In other words, once again, the only way to understand the general possibility of language (which must, after all, amount to drawing *some* connection between signifiers and signifieds) is to affirm the paradox of regress involved in the actuality of signification itself, whereby each signifier becomes a possible object of signification for another.

**Excess, Virtuality, Ideality**

If we are thus, once again, led to affirm sense as the inherently paradoxical condition for the possibility of any signification whatsoever (here, the precondition for any systematic relationship between the system or structure of signifiers and that of the signifieds), then what consequences follow for how we should think

---

[11] As Deleuze indeed notes, the general reason for the paradox, which may be put as the fact that "there is no name for the name" or "there is no concept for the concept" is already implicated in Frege's classical distinction between sense and reference, as Frege himself recognized by famously stating (in Frege (1892)) that, since concepts cannot have names, it is nonsensical to say that "the concept 'horse' is a concept."

of the overall structure of language in itself?  The most important such consequence is that there is in language a fundamental and constitutive *excess of signification* over the signified, a surplus of signifiers that always goes beyond the actuality of what is signified.  To see this, consider again the paradox of regress and the alternation of signifiers and signifieds to which it gives rise.  This alternation is not simply a static exchange, but is always directional and oriented: for at each level, it is the existence of a *signified* that implies the existence of a *signifier* (which then, if supplied, becomes a new signified, and so on).  In other words, what is demanded at each stage by the principle that everything real must have (or be capable of having) a name is, at each stage, a new signifier: in this way, the directionality of the whole series is oriented toward the excess (always one more) of signifiers over signifieds.  Given the completion of the series to any particular stage, it will always be possible to ask for the signifier of what exists at that stage, and so to move to the next one by means of its provision.  Short of dropping or suspending the principle that everything must have a name, there is nothing we can do to block this regress, which we may accordingly take to define the (infinite) totality of significations.   We may accordingly take this oriented, directional excess to be essential to language, and definitive of sense itself.

This excess of signification is nothing other than the permanent and original dimension of latency recognized as an inherent consequence of Saussure's structuralism by Lévi-Strauss , Lacan, and Miller (see chapter 2, above).  When this excess of signification is problematically signified within language itself, it gives rise to the famous "floating signifier," which is, according to Lévi-Strauss, "the promise of all art, all poetry, all mythic and aesthetic invention."[12]  To this set of promises, Deleuze adds, as well, a political significance, holding that the floating signifier can also be understood as the "promise of all revolutions."[13]

Indeed, according to Deleuze, we may use this understanding of the role of paradoxical sense in underlying the dynamic structure of language to comprehend the general conditions of *structure* as such.  The first of these conditions, as we have seen, is the existence of two heterogeneous series, one determined as signifying and the other as signified.  But the relationship, or tension, between the two series is necessary to determining the dynamism of structure as such.  That is why the second condition is that:

> Each of these series is constituted by terms which exist only through the relations they maintain with one another.  To these relations, or rather to the values of these relations, there correspond

---

[12] *LofS*, p. 49.

[13] *LofS*, p. 49.

very particular events, that is, *singularities* which are assignable within the structure. The situation is very similar to that of differential calculus, where the distributions of singular points correspond to the values of differential relations.[14]

Both the existence and the dynamism of the two series, linked in problematic correspondence, is an outcome of the circulation of the paradoxical element that manifests sense itself, the empty square or the floating signifier corresponding to the floated signified. But this circulation is not, according to Deleuze, simply a homogenous development, or unitary progression; it is, rather, articulated by specific points of inflection, reversal, and qualitative differentiation. These are the "sense-events" at the basis of all change and becoming. They are *singular* points in that they are: "turning points and points of inflection; bottlenecks, knots, foyers, and centers; points of fusion, condensation, and boiling; points of tears and joy, sickness and health, hope and anxiety, 'sensitive points."[15] Because they articulate sense, which (as we have seen) is prior to and different from the ordinary linguistic order of reference and signification, they are not to be understood as equivalent to individual agents, states of affairs, or universal concepts. In this respect, singularities are definitively *neutral*. Indeed, Deleuze says, they escape and precede the oppositions between the individual and the collective, the personal and the impersonal, and the particular and the general. Their articulation and distribution conditions not only the two normal chains of signifiers and signifieds in their mutual relations and correspondences, but can *also* displace these relations into entirely new directions and connections.

This recognition of the way that what he calls singularities, or events, articulates any possible dynamism of structures by means of its paradoxical neutrality leads Deleuze to theorize structure and event as deeply and constitutively linked. Thus, "it is imprecise to oppose structure and event;" for "the structure includes a register of ideal *events*."[16] Within the structure that is defined simply by its differential relations, the singularities (or sense-events) are those points that correspond to what seem to be solid elements, for instance the specific values in the differential structure of linguistic phonemes that correspond to the actual values of sounds and letters.[17] These events, or singularities, are thus *ideal* in that they correspond to the structure of language as a whole and define its action, but at the same time *real* in that they account for the actual processes of change and becoming that occur within the course of this action.

---

[14] *LofS*, p. 50.

[15] *LofS*, p. 52.

[16] *LofS*, p. 50.

[17] *LofS*, p. 50.

Indeed, as Deleuze argues in *Difference and Repetition*, the relationship of pre-conditioning here (what is expressed by calling the field of sense "transcendental") is no longer to be understood as a matter of *conditions of possibility* at all, but rather as a dimension of *the virtual* that is not opposed to the real, but in fact, a part of it:

> 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 and relations along with the singular points which correspond to them. The reality of the virtual is a structure.[18]

It is only as real, and indeed as a "part" or dimension of the objects themselves, that the dimension of sense can articulate their meaning and determine their properties. It does not do so, however, by resembling them or replicating their form, but rather through the original effects of structure, which (as we have seen) opens and ensures the circulation of the two series of words and objects. Rather than being opposed to the elements of these series in terms of the duality of possible and real, therefore, the paradoxical structure of sense conditions these elements in their total structure, and mutual definitive relationships, by means of a virtuality that is opposed to the "actuality" of these elements, without being in any respect less than completely determinate and productive.

This paradoxical element at the basis of the movement of language and the possibility of sense combines a number of contradictory features: "It is at once excess and lack, empty square and supernumerary object, a place without an occupant and an occupant without a place, 'floating signifier' and floated signified, esoteric word and exoteric thing, white word and black object."[19] The paradoxical, two-sided element is thus neither word nor thing, but this does not preclude it from having its *own* proper sense; indeed, given its capability to present the form of *all* sense, Deleuze argues, its own proper sense will be unique and exceptional. In fact, the defining characteristic of this element is precisely that it "denotes

---

[18] *D&R*, pp. 208-09

[19] *LofS*, p. 66.

exactly what it expresses and expresses what it denotes."[20]  In other words, "It says something, but at the same time it says the sense of what it says: it says its own sense."[21]

But it is this unique self-relation of the "paradoxical element" that says its own sense (and so manifests, in this self-showing, what paradoxically *conditions* the entirety of sense itself) that points to what is perhaps the most remarkable parallel suggested by Deleuze's whole analysis.  This is the parallel to what is indeed, as we have already seen, the founding paradox of set theory's consideration of meaning and reference: Russell's paradox of the set of all sets that are not members of themselves.[22]  In drawing out the comparison, Deleuze emphasizes how the existence of the "paradoxical element" that says its own sense must necessarily imply a fundamental structural violation of the "regressive law" that assigns the designation of each object to a higher level or type, as well as the "disjunctive law" that demands that a property cannot refer to itself:

> …When the regressive law states that the sense of a name must be denoted by another name, these names of different degrees refer, from the point of view of signification, to classes or properties of different "types."  Every property must belong to a type higher than the properties or individuals over which it presides, and every class must belong to a type higher than the objects which it contains.  It follows that a class cannot be a member of itself, nor may it contain members of different types.  Likewise, according to the disjunctive law, a determination of signification states that the property or the term in relation to which a classification is made cannot belong to any of the groups of the same type which are classified in relation to it.  An element cannot be part of the sub-sets which it determines, nor a part of the set whose existence it presupposes.  Thus, two forms of the absurd correspond to the two figures of nonsense, and these forms are defined as 'stripped of signification' and as constituting *paradoxes*: a set which is included in itself as a member; the member dividing the set which it presupposes – the set of all

---

[20] *LofS*, p. 67.

[21] *LofS*, p. 67.  There are some interesting parallels to be drawn here to Derrida's treatment of words such as *chora*, *hymen*, and even his own coinages such as *différance* (see chapter 4, below).

[22] Deleuze emphasizes the relevance of this paradox, among others, to the analysis of sense: "We cannot get rid of paradoxes by saying that they are more worthy of Carroll's work then they are of the *Principia Mathematica*.  What is good for Carroll is good for logic … For paradoxes, on the contrary, inhere in language, and the whole problem is to know whether language would be able to function without bringing about the insistence of such entities." *LofS*, p. 74.

sets, and the "barber of the regiment." The absurd then is sometimes a confusion of formal levels in the regressive synthesis, sometimes a vicious circle in the disjunctive synthesis.[23]

Thus, the most general and underlying paradox of sense, manifest in the "paradoxical element" that, in linking the floating signifier to the floating signified, presents the original and pervasive excess of signification, is identical in form to Russell's paradox of the set of all sets that are not members of themselves (or to its more "intuitive" version, the paradox of the barber who must shave all those in the regiment who do not shave themselves). As we have seen, the paradoxical Russell set has two determinants, which correspond precisely to the two sides of absurdity, as presented by Deleuze. First, there is the possibility for a set to be contained within itself, which Russell himself sought to prohibit through the imposition of a hierarchy of types (and which is similarly prohibited by what Deleuze calls the "regressive law.") Second, there is the capacity of any well-defined set (given by the fundamental axioms of set theory (extensionality)) to determine a distinction (what Deleuze calls a "disjunctive synthesis") between what is within it and what is outside it. If we allow a set (or element) to possess both capacities, and thus to violate both of Deleuze's laws, the paradox of the set of all sets that are not self-membered results immediately. But the "paradoxical element" which is nonsense in that, denoting its own sense, it violates both of these normal laws, must be considered to be just such a one.

As we saw above (chapter 1), Russell's response to his own paradox of set membership is a gesture that is both theoretical and prohibitive: he introduces as an absolute law of language and membership the hierarchy of types, which makes it impossible for the set of all sets (or the Russell set of all sets not members of themselves) even to be defined (let alone to "exist"). This gesture, indeed, defines as legal only those sets that comport with (the set-theoretic versions of) Deleuze's two laws of normal signification: that no set can be a member of itself (no sign can denote its own sense), and that no set can define a disjunction that its definition itself presupposes.

However, Deleuze's response, while recognizing the existence and far-ranging implications of the same paradox, is fundamentally different, and even the direct opposite of Russell's. In particular, as Deleuze shows, we may then take the laws prohibiting self-membership and self-applying disjunctions as indeed conditioning "proper" or non-paradoxical sense, without, nevertheless, completely denying any sense whatsoever to such paradoxical elements as do indeed violate these laws of "proper" signification. The decision to do so, in fact, reflects the recognition that the prohibitions that guarantee the absence of paradox, in legislating the conditions for the regular operation of the domain of proper or "good" sense,

---

[23] *LofS*, p. 69.

also first give rise to the ordinary logical laws and axioms constitutive of this domain, including the law of non-contradiction and the principles underlying ordinary set membership and inclusion.[24]

Even more suggestively, the close analogy (or identity) that Deleuze points out between the paradoxical element that, in illegally presenting its own sense, bears the status of nonsense, and the Russell set of all sets that are not members of themselves, yields the suggestion of a remarkable and radical insight into the basis for the general meaning of concepts itself. For if we may consider the denotation of various individuals by a general term or concept to be analogous to (or identical to) the grouping of these individuals within a particular, well-defined set, then we may indeed, conversely, consider the relationship of set membership, figured by the symbol "$\in$" (usually read "is an element of,") to stand for the relationship that an individual bears to a concept that it falls under (see above, chapter 1). Indeed, that such a definition is always possible is precisely the intuition underlying Frege's original formulation of the unrestricted comprehension axiom. And extending the analogy (or identity) between set membership and general denotation, we may take whatever determines the *unity* of a set – here, precisely what *is symbolized* by the sign "$\in$"– to be (analogous to) sense.

(In other words, we are assuming that "sense is whatever determines reference.") However, as we have seen, Frege's intuition is ruined by the apparent definability of a set that, in its definition, refers to this general relation of set membership (and exclusion) itself, the Russell set. The consequence is that, in ordinary set theory, such sets are debarred, and it is impermissible to define any set by terms that *refer* to the general relationship of set membership (as the Russell set does); indeed, the relationship of inclusion symbolized by "$\in$" is simply taken as a given and never defined. *However* – and this is the essential contribution of a theory of the paradoxical stratum of sense as prior to, and underlying, the domain of ordinary signification – *if* we may nevertheless accord sense prior to this paradoxical set or element, *its sense will be, precisely, the sense of "$\in$" itself.*

That is, the criterion that the Russell set uses to determine its members is stateable in terms of – and only in terms of – set membership itself (together with negation, which must be considered a feature of *any* logical language). If it is indeed impossible to speak of set membership, of the relationship that links concepts to individuals or universals to particulars, then this paradoxical element does not exist and cannot ever appear in any presentation or presence. If, however, it is indeed possible to conceive it as manifest – although illegal in the normal order of signification – as the exceptional remainder, the excess of signification, the empty square or the floating signifier (correlative to a deficiency in the order of the

---

[24] *LofS*, p. 69.

signified), then its own proper sense is precisely this general relationship of universals to particulars itself. Thus, by means of the fundamental paradox of signification that nevertheless took logic and the theory of signs two millennia to discern, something like a (problematic) solution is found for the problem that Plato already grasped as his most fundamental one: the problem of *participation,* or the link between the Idea and the particular that institutes the very order of language.

## Deleuze's Platonism

As we have seen, sense is therefore, for Deleuze, a paradoxical *virtual* structure that produces becoming as the result of the ideal effectivity of sense-events in articulating turning points and fundamental inflections of change. It is this paradoxical structure of sense in underlying the phenomena of language and becoming that allows Deleuze to propose a radical re-thinking of the relationship of Ideas to things, alternative to the conception Plato often suggests, which understands this relationship as one of resemblance or representation. For Deleuze, in fact, the virtual is the "characteristic state of Ideas"; it is the basis for the *production* of any existence whatsoever.[25] Paradoxical sense thus defines an original domain of constitution, positive and relational in itself, prior to and independent of the opposition between the possible and the real, or the hypothetical and the necessary. This domain is ordered not by the similarity between the image and the original or the resemblance between model and copy, but by the even more original and positive relationship between sense and what it conditions, one which has nothing to do with either resemblance or representation.

One of the primary uses of this inquiry into sense, according to Deleuze, is to evince a theory of the conditioning of phenomena that does not exclude their change and becoming, or in other words does not relegate this conditioning to the order of static being. In fact, through its definition as *inherently* paradoxical, as "going in both directions at once," original sense, prior to the ordering assumptions of good sense and common sense, can indeed provide such an accounting. This is the basis of its utility in answering to the paradox of becoming already identified by Plato: in becoming taller, Alice is, in the act and at the moment of becoming, both tall (in relation to her earlier state) and small (in relation to her later one). This paradox, of the "simultaneity of a becoming whose characteristic is to elude the present"[26] is not simply the problem of the *specific* relationship involved in what Plato called "participation," which presents itself (on the surface, at least) as the problem of the relationship of two static beings (the idea and

---

[25] *D&R*, p. 211

[26] *LofS*, p. 1.

the participant) with one another.  Rather, it is the more original problem of relationality *as such*, which is closely linked to the latter problem and, in a certain way, underlies it.  Thus, as Deleuze says, there are in fact two dimensions or aspects of determination implied by Plato's theory.  The first is the dimension of "limited and measured things, of fixed qualities, permanent or temporary"; this is the dimension that corresponds to the theory of Ideas as it is classically interpreted.[27]  However, caught within this theory and implicit (and at some places explicit) in the Platonic text is a second dimension, that of the determination of a "pure becoming without measure," whereby, for instance, "…the younger becoming older than the older, the older [becomes] younger than the younger – but they can never finally become so; if they did they would no longer be becoming, but would be so." [28]

This second dimension, the dimension of becoming, is omitted from the theory of Ideas as classically interpreted, but as Deleuze points out, it is hardly ignored by Plato himself.  Rather, it is the basis of a second and more profound dualism that we can discern in Plato's own text, in addition to and *at the basis of* the more familiar dualism of intelligible Idea and sensible object.  By contrast with the more familiar one, this is a:

> …more profound and secret dualism hidden in sensible and material bodies themselves.  It is a subterranean dualism between that which receives the action of the Idea and that which eludes this action.  It is not the distinction between the Model and the copy, but rather between copies and simulacra.  Pure becoming, the unlimited, is the matter of the simulacrum insofar as it eludes the action of the Idea and insofar as it contests *both* model and *copy* at once.[29]

This second dualism does not, then, concern the relationship between the (definite) object and the (defining) idea, but rather splits the object between that part that receives the action of the Idea and that which remains the substrate of this action, the bare matter or unformed substance of the object itself.  Again, the question here is not, therefore, the question of the relationship of the static Idea to its static participant, but of what allows the participant to participate, and thus to "receive" the various forms as it proceeds from one state to another.  This second dualism, as Deleuze points out, thus suggests a more basic problem of becoming, at the root of any description of participation, and thus at the basis of any theory of Ideas.

---

[27] *LofS*, p. 1.

[28] *LofS*, p. 1.

[29] *LofS*, p. 2.

It is a problem that, as Plato was well aware, affects and haunts the description of the Idea at every point. It crops up, repeatedly in the Platonic corpus, precisely at the points where the theory of Ideas is exposed to the question of change.[30] In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze treats this problem of "pure becoming" as essential to any possible contemporary reading of Plato, arguing that it yields a conception that is at once profoundly in the spirit of Plato's own suggestions, and yet provides the basis for the entire contemporary project of "overturning" or "reversing" Platonism. In particular: whereas the more familiar dualism of static Idea and its static object (or of the intelligible and the sensible) orders all metaphysical relations in terms of *representation*, or the relationship between an original and a copy, the second, "subterranean" dualism of becoming provides the basis for a re-thinking of this relationship that completely re-orders these relations, and allows us to think of the action of Ideas completely outside the regime of representation. This alternative – between an ordered regime of representation based on the copying of originals (with the Idea always thought as the original, and its objects as more or less good copies) and a deeper, non-representational order of replication – is the alternative that, for Deleuze, defines the imperative to "overcome Platonism," which is the imperative to "glorify… the reign of simulacra…," affirming their rights over those of the copy.[31]

What, however, is a simulacrum? A simulacrum is an "image without resemblance" built not upon similarity or identity, but upon disparity and difference.[32] Although it produces an "effect" of resemblance, it is not at all *founded upon* resemblance; rather, this effect is "an effect of the whole, completely external and produced by totally different means than those at work within the model.[33] It is constituted not by the similarity of essence or its static repetition, but by an inherently differential network of relations; in this network "repetition already plays upon repetitions, and difference already

---

[30] Deleuze mentions, for instance, *Philebus* 24d: "The hotter and equally the colder are always in flux and never remain, while definite quantity means standstill and the end of all progression. The upshot of this argument is that the hotter, together with its opposite, turn out to be unlimited"; and the second hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, according to which the One "partakes of being." On this hypothesis: "what is younger comes to be older in relation to what has come to be earlier and is older, but it never is older. On the contrary, it always comes to be older than that thing. For the older advances toward the younger, while the younger advances toward the older. And, in the same way, the older, in its turn, comes to be younger than the younger. For both, by going toward their opposites, come to be each other's opposite…" (154e-155a). Another relevant passage, not mentioned by Deleuze, is *Phaedo* 102d-103a, where the opposition of forms determines them as "approaching" and "fleeing," even being "destroyed" by the approaching of their opposites. (It is no accident that the "unlimited" or infinite repeatedly appears at just this point).

[31] Deleuze (1968) (henceforth: *D&R*), p. 66. cf: "So 'to reverse Platonism' means to make the simulacra rise and to affirm their rights among icons and copies." (p. 262)

[32] *D&R*, p. 257.

[33] *D&R*, p. 258.

plays upon differences."[34]  Thus, whereas Platonism founds the "entire domain that philosophy will later recognize as its own," as the order of representation "defined …by an essential relation to the model or foundation," affirming the rights of simulacra allows us to discern *behind* this order another, more chaotic one: an order of pure differences as producing everything that we recognize as similitude, preceding and constituting all identity and representation as such.[35]

With the analysis we have already considered of the paradoxes of language and their ultimate ground in the paradoxical structure of sense, in fact, we already have in place all the resources needed to understand this strange order of simulacra, and the kind of alternative it defines for Plato and his contemporary reception.  As we have already seen, in particular, the circulation of the paradoxical element between signifiers and signifieds manifests a "donation of sense" that has nothing to do with the relationship of copy to original, but is rather, itself, a "pure effect" of the action of structure, the network of differences. Given these relations, "that which is … has no prior constituted identity: things are reduced to the difference which fragments them…"[36]  The basis for the possibility of this reduction is, again, the purely differential order of symbolic language, which elicits sense as both its effect and its paradoxical quasi-cause.  This original order of pure differences is the order of simulacra, and defines the possibility of their infinite circulation in language.  In underlying this circulation, simulacrum and symbol are in a certain sense "one"; in particular, "the simulacrum is the sign in so far as the sign interiorises the conditions of its own repetition."[37]  That is, it is in the constitutive relationships that define the meaning of the sign and the possibility of its meaningful iteration that we can locate the procession and circulation of simulacra, a circulation that both precedes and produces the order of representation and similitude.  These relations are to be understood – and can *only* be understood – in terms of the pure differential order exhibited by the paradoxical structure of sense.

We have also seen, above, that the key to understanding this structure is to consider the circulation of the "paradoxical element," which, manifesting the constitutive excess of signification, both disjoins and first articulates the two series of signifiers and signifieds.  In connection with the sense-events that articulate the structure of paradoxical sense as "going in both directions at once," this circulation is the basis for the "pure becoming" that is "the matter of the simulacrum …insofar as it contests *both* model *and* copy," or

---

[34] *D&R*, p. xix.

[35] *D&R*, p. 259.

[36] *D&R*, p. 67.

[37] *D&R*, p. 67.

in other words the whole domain of representation.[38]  Whatever the extent of his adherence to the "official," representationalist theory of Ideas, Plato, it seems, suspected as much.  Indeed, "Sometimes Plato wonders whether … pure becoming might not have a very peculiar relation to language."[39]  Throughout the Platonic corpus, in fact, in passing instances and dialectical suggestions, strange anticipations and even aporetic conclusions, the specter of an originary difference and an order of the simulacrum, before and beyond the action of the Idea and the distinction between model and copy, flashes up and comes to expression, only to be modified, repressed, or subjected once again to the stable order of representation.

Such is the case, according to Deleuze, with the ultimate conclusion of the *Sophist*, which attempts to identify the sophist by separating, at a crucial point (236c) the good image-making of imitation to the bad image-making of the fabrication of appearances, which are apparently (*if* the distinction can be made) responsible for the possibility of error and falsehood (cf. 264c, and also *Republic* X, 601ff).  However, at the final end (268a), "we glimpse the possibility of the triumph of simulacra" in that the Sophist does not ultimately "distinguish himself from Socrates, placing the legitimacy of such a distinction in question."[40]  Other examples of the sudden, lightening-like appearance of the simulacra and their indistinction from the Ideas occur in connection with Plato's consideration of a "model of the Other" that witnesses the original possibility of a kind of model of difference or dissimilitude itself (see, for instance, *Theatetus* 176e and *Timaeus* 28bff).

As Deleuze notes, at decisive moments in the Platonic corpus, as well, the paradox of becoming-unlimited according to which "more and less are always going a point further" is explicitly connected to the phenomena of language and writing.[41]  This is the case, for instance, in the *Philebus*, where "it is through discourse that the same thing flits around, becoming one and many in all sorts of ways, in whatever it may be that is said at any time, both long ago and now." (15d).  Here, the possibility of a limitless flux or circulation of things is guaranteed not only by this "gift of the gods to men" (16c) but, even further, by its articulation into "letters" (17a), the systematicity of the alphabet (18b-c), and the articulation of sounds by mutes or silences.  As is shown by Derrida's classic analysis in "Plato's Pharmacy" this is even more the case in the *Phaedrus*, where writing is opposed to spoken language as both *supplement* and *inherent*

---

[38] *LofS*, p. 2.

[39] *LofS*, p. 2.

[40] *D&R*, p. 128.

[41] *LofS*, p. 258.

*threat*, the "pharmakon" which is both cure and poison.[42]  Thus, as Deleuze points out, according to Derrida's analysis, writing is here the *simulacrum* of logos; it is, in other words: "a false suitor, insofar as it claims to take hold of the logos by violence and by ruse, or even to supplant it without passing through the father."[43]  The deconstructive aim that Deleuze and Derrida have in common, then, is simply to re-affirm the originary status and original rights of this simulacrum or false suitor, along with the irreducible and positive difference (compare Derrida's *différance*) that it demonstrates.

One of the most striking instances of the connection between simulacra and language, however, is the opinion voiced in passing by Socrates near the middle of the dialogue most profoundly dedicated to language and names, the *Cratylus*:

> Most of our wise men nowadays get so dizzy going around and around in their search for the nature of the things that are, that the things themselves appear to them to be turning around and moving every which way.  Well, I think that the people who gave things their names in very ancient times are exactly like these wise men.  They don't blame this on their own internal condition, however, but on the nature of the things themselves, which they think are never stable or steadfast, but flowing and moving, full of every sort of motion and constant coming into being. (411b-c)

The basis of this suggestion (which Socrates considers but nevertheless does not endorse, seemingly quoting the opinion of "wise men" and the *nomothetēs* or name-givers of ancient times) is the Heraclitean theory of constant becoming and uncontrollable flux.  This theory is preserved on the more "official" level of the dialogue by Socrates' quotation of it,[44] as well as by the presence of Cratylus, who was himself historically a student of Heraclitus.  The view that Cratylus actually voices holds that "one can never speak nor say anything falsely;" (429e) the basis of this view is apparently an implicit rejection of the possibility of distinguishing between the "true copy" and the "false copy" with respect to names (cf. *Sophist* 264c).  However, Cratylus is easily refuted, on the official level of the text at least, by Socrates' appeal to a representational order of likeness as the ultimate basis for the truth and falsity of names (430a-d).  On the "official" level, therefore, the view endorsed by Socrates refutes the Heraclitean one, ultimately insisting upon a position whose defense is nevertheless, as Socrates indeed recognizes, "like hauling a ship up a sticky ramp" (435c), according to which "names should be as much like things as

---

[42] Derrida (1972).

[43] *LofS*, p. 361.

[44] 402a.

possible." This is the position of the order of representation; at the fundamental level of the assignation of names, it propounds an order of likeness and similarity that is supposed to ground and provide the possibility of all linguistic truth or falsity. However, repeatedly throughout the dialogue, this assumption at the level of the *nomothesis*, the posing of the law and the assignation of names, is contested by the suggestion of another, quite different foundation: one of pure becoming, flux, and flows whose basis, and evidence, is paradox.

We have seen, above (chapter 1), that the problem of the nomothesis is both at the center of the *Cratylus* and the basis of its ultimate invocation of forms, or ideas, as the source of the correctness of names and the force of their law. At first, the correctness of names seems to depend on the authority and divine power of the *nomothetēs*, the ancient and mysterious giver of names; by knowing the forms themselves, the nomothetēs or technician of names is able to mandate the law that links them to their objects in the correctness of an assumed correspondence. In a characteristic move that is replicated elsewhere throughout the Platonic corpus, this divine technology of production is itself, however, subordinated to the truer and deeper knowledge of the *user*, the knowledge of the form or idea that is manifest in the everyday practice (or *ethos*) of language and in the "agreement" that underlies it. This is the basis for Socrates' grudging admission that, much as he would like to defend a view that accords the ultimate basis of names to a mimetic relation of resemblance between words and things, we may indeed "have to make use of this worthless thing, convention, in the correctness of names." (435c). Nevertheless, even in making this admission, it is clear that Socrates still sees convention and usage as governed by an order of representational connections and similarities between words and things, an order of similarity or "appropriate" usage (435c) that defines the "best," if not the only, way to speak.

The question (which Plato does not hesitate to raise and pursue to its aporetic end) is precisely whether this assumption is justified: whether everyday usage exhibits the knowledge of true names *as* the knowledge of identity and resemblance, whether it simply applies infinitely the consequences of the deterministic repetition of a self-same Idea, austere and timeless, or whether, as Cratylus seems to suggest, it is the "chance of usage and convention that makes both like and unlike letters express things." (435a). For what is at stake in this question of the relative priority of use and original designation, according to Deleuze, is *nothing other than the nature of forms in their entry into the world*, their force in determining the possibility of reference and the nature of knowledge.

As Deleuze points out, in fact, despite his official theory of representation, the inquiry in the *Cratylus* into the correctness of names repeatedly leads Socrates to suspect a more original relation of language to the procession of simulacra, unconstrained by representation and at the root of the "pure becoming" that first

articulates the difference, and the paradox, of being and becoming.[45] On this suspicion, "…names signify the being or essence of things to us on the assumption that all things are moving and flowing and being swept along." (436e). Or alternatively, Socrates suspects without confirming the existence of "two languages and two sorts of 'names,' one designating the pauses and the rests which receive the action of the Idea, the other expressing the movements or rebel becomings…" [46] On this hypothesis, the original fixation of names by the divine *nomothetēs* or name-giver is decisively and violently split between those names that "point to rest" and those that "point to motion," between the hypothesis of a stable order of representation relating names to beings and a "rebel" order of simulacra relating them to becoming and change, producing a kind of "civil war among names" (438d) that ruins our ability to "judge between them" and demands, according to Socrates, another, quite different starting point.

If we are to avoid this constitutive split and this ruination of knowledge caused by the two orders of names, therefore, we must have recourse, Socrates says, to something "other than names, something that will make plain to us without using names which of these two kinds of names are the true ones – that is to say, the ones that express the truth about the things that are." (438d). This "something other than names" is, in fact, nothing other than the Idea, determined as that which avoids all change, flux, and becoming:

> Socrates: Still, let's investigate one further issue so as to avoid being deceived by the fact that so many of these names seem to lean in the same direction – as we will be if, as seems to me to be the case, the name-givers really did give them in the belief that everything is always moving and flowing, and as it happens things aren't really that way at all, but the name-givers have fallen into a kind of vortex and are whirled around in it, dragging us with them. Consider, Cratylus, a question that I for my part often dream about: Are we or aren't we to say that there is a beautiful itself, and a good itself, and the same for each one of the things that are?
>
> Cratylus: I think we are, Socrates. (439b-439d).

The necessity to avoid the rebel element, and the imperative to think the order of language as possible only on the basis of a pre-existing order of resemblance and similarity, thus completely determines Plato's

---

[45] *LofS*, p. 2. Compare Plato: "The things that are are moving, but some are moving quickly, others slowly. So what moves quickly is not all there is, but the admirable part of it. …. It seems that many people agree with one another about it up to a point, but beyond that they disagree. Those who think that the universe is in motion believe that most of it is of such a kind as to do nothing but give way, but that something penetrates all of it and generates everything that comes into being. This, they say, is the fastest and smallest thing of all, for if it were not the smallest, so that nothing could keep it out, or not the fastest, so that it could treat all other things as though they were standing still, it wouldn't be able to travel through everything." (*Cratylus* 412c-413a); cf. also 413d-414a.

[46] *LofS*, p. 2.

recourse here to the being of the Idea, thought of as "before names" in its mystical force, even prior to and underlying as a condition of possibility the power of the *nomothetēs*, which has fallen into error in considering becoming and motion to be primary.  Here, in finally deciding the ultimate power of the *nomothetēs*, Plato thus seemingly affirms once more the right of the Idea over the simulacrum, even to the point of denying the ultimate relevance of the results of the very inquiry into names and their meaning which has so clearly articulated the investigation up to this point.   However, there remains a fundamental paradox, as Plato is well aware; he does not deny it, but in fact uses it to conclude the dialogue at a point of aporia.  It is, once again, the paradox of becoming:

> Socrates: But if it [the beautiful] is always passing away, can we correctly say of it first that it is *this*, and then that it is *such and such*?  Or, at the very instant we are speaking, isn't it inevitably and immediately becoming a different thing and altering and no longer being as it was?
>
> Cratylus: It is.
>
> Socrates: Then if it never stays the same, how can it *be* something?  After all, if it ever stays the same, it clearly isn't changing – at least, not during that time; and if it always stays the same and is always ever the same thing, so that it never departs from its own form, how can it ever change or move?
>
> Cratylus: There's no way.  (439d-e).

The inadequacy Plato recognizes here, and in fact never denies, is the inadequacy of being and the static order of presence to all motion, change and becoming.  The paradox, Socrates concludes by saying, threatens to ruin knowledge itself, for if language does indeed demonstrate a flux, change and becoming at the root of things, if things therefore are fundamentally "unsound, like leaky sinks," "like people with runny noses…afflicted with colds and drip[ping] over everything," (440c-d), it will be impossible as well for knowledge ever to be knowledge of what is, for each state of knowledge will pass over into something that is not knowledge, and there will be no knowledge as such.  Nevertheless – and his assertion of it is an index of Plato's supreme integrity and honesty, far beyond that of those who see here simply an *apologia* for the rights of the Idea -- it remains "certainly possible that things are that way;" there is no way, Socrates concludes the dialogue by saying, simply to exclude this rebel hypothesis of becoming, flux, and change.  It will stand just below the surface of the Platonic text, for the two thousand years of philosophy's development of the Platonism of static Ideas, as a suppressed remainder of the original dualism of simulacra and copy that precedes and underlies the dualism of the idea and its object, a

subcutaneous trace of the original paradox of sense in articulating the being and becoming of words and things.