

The Philosophical Quarterly

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Gilles Deleuze's Difference and Repetition: a Critical Introduction and Guide. BY JAMES WILLIAMS. (Edinburgh UP, 2003. Pp. x + 216. Price £50.00 h/b, £17.99 p/b.)

At the centre of the work of Deleuze is the book *Difference and Repetition*. Williams rightly points to it as a 'keystone' in that its major innovation is an account of the structure of reality. This Deleuzian reality is doubled – both 'virtual' and 'actual' – and takes seriously the rationalist arguments regarding the nature of relation, whilst resting itself on an empiricism of the event understood as an individuation of forces. It mixes Hume with Spinoza and Leibniz, underpinned by Nietzsche and Bergson. It presents a philosophy that self-consciously roots itself in Stoic and Scotian thought, whilst radically altering the structures of validity through understanding truth as 'a matter of irresolvable problems' (p. 2). Williams attempts both to show us how the work functions and to extract key moments or arguments from the book, in order to provide some grounds for a discussion of the validity of the Deleuzian move. This, however, means that he has to stay very close to his subject. Given both this closeness to the subject and the complexity or peculiarity of that subject in the first place, Williams' book has to walk a thin line of mediation which neither reduces the original to a series of phrases which lose their force when taken out of context nor assumes that it is possible to express Deleuze's complex thought with 'greater clarity'. At times it may falter, but it has managed to succeed in its central task of beginning a critical comprehension of the Deleuzian arguments.

Williams usefully focuses on the method or culture of thought which Deleuze advocates, in particular on the 'principles and methods for a philosophy of difference' (p. 26). Principles, rather than rules, govern an experimental thinking. In particular, Deleuze's main goal is to attempt to develop concepts of difference and repetition that are not subordinated to the concepts of identity or representation, which means he must somehow provide us with a structure of significance that is 'prior to well defined concepts and to knowledge' (p. 32). Williams claims, for example (p. 14), that for Deleuze, 'well defined things are mere abstractions'. For many philosophers, whose primary aim is the clarification of definitions and in particular the definitions of concepts, it is not obvious how Deleuze is ever going to be able to succeed in his task, as he must stand against or in some ways give up the notion of judgement, since without a definition there is no criterion of judgement. Williams argues (p. 29) that instead of judgement Deleuze wants to pursue the

notion of selection – we are no longer to identify the different, but to select between the differences. The notion of selection is derived by Deleuze from his reading of Nietzsche, where the object is no longer the judgement of an identity but the selection of a passive or an active force. If, however, selection is not to be dominated by the concept of identity, then this means that it is not possible to use simple criteria as the basis for the selection. It might seem that the criteria are implicitly those of the active or passive forces, but the point for Deleuze and for Nietzsche is that these active or passive forces can only be determined on the basis of the particular circumstance. As soon as we introduce the notion of selection, however, it seems that there must be some sort of implicit goal. A selection is a selection for something, and we select towards a purpose, not just in the abstract. This sense of a particular purpose to philosophy and to philosophical selection is something Williams does not seem to pursue in any great detail in his reading of Deleuze, and yet the purpose of the Deleuzian move to reject the concept of identity cannot but seem the central question when reading Deleuze. After all, what is the purpose of rejecting the concept of identity? What harm does it do, and what advantages do we gain by placing the concept of difference in a higher determinative position?

One of the objections which could be made to Deleuze and one which Williams notes in his introduction is that if concepts are not determined, then they cannot be useful. A vague concept is an imprecise tool. Deleuze's response is to argue that the concept can never be fully determined; but his arguments against the complete determination of a concept rest upon implicit presuppositions of what this would consist in, presuppositions that derive from what Deleuze sees as necessary consequences of a representational model of thought. He argues, following Leibniz, that a completely determined concept must have an infinite comprehension of the object, that is, that if the object has an infinite set of properties, so therefore must the concept. Concepts, however, are blocked not simply by their failure to represent the properties of an object adequately, but also by the fact that the concept, as a word, must be defined by other words, a definition which cannot be infinite. The problem here is that the Deleuzian argument around concepts and their failure is a central part of the case against representational thought. It might be argued that unless the case against representational thought first succeeds, there is little point in developing a philosophy of 'pure differences'. Deleuze's arguments may point not to any need to drop the notion of representation, but only to the features upon which we need to do more philosophical work of clarification. Williams is of course not unaware of this situation, and indicates very clearly that the weakness in Deleuze's approach 'would have benefited from, for example, a debate with the Fregean analytic tradition where a great deal of work has been done on the problem of reference' (p. 39). Williams does not enter this debate, but then that is not the purpose of this work. It is in fact to his credit that he indicates the need for debate.

The task Williams appears to have set himself and a task he seems to have succeeded in is to present Deleuze's work philosophically, warts and all. What this does is enable new readers to approach a key text in modern European philosophy in such a way that they are aware of both the strengths and weaknesses of that work and the opportunities for future engagement with Deleuze. In particular, Williams

has presented the strength of *Difference and Repetition* as a new style of thought, characterized by Williams in the form of a Deleuzian dialectics or critical philosophy (p. 22). It becomes clear from reading Williams that there are weaknesses in Deleuze's argument around sense, concept and representation, but that his strength lies in the articulation of an alternative critical philosophy.

The purpose and task of Deleuze's philosophy, then, is to articulate an empiricist account of reality that simultaneously accounts for its metaphysical status as a conceptual philosophical construction. The bulk of Williams' work presents itself as an articulation of this task as it is found in Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, and provides a valuable doorway into a complex philosophy.

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