

## WHAT IS DIFFERENCE? DELEUZE AND SAINT THOMAS

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The difference between the univocal and the equivocal concept of being marks a firm separation of philosophy from theology. Considering the *analogia entis* as the core structure of the epistemology of Thomas corresponding to the concept of being as the supreme reference point of his metaphysics, Deleuze misses a positive concept of difference in Thomas, who cannot avoid explaining difference in relation to an external reference or to a transcendent principle. Analogical Being, whenever related to particular beings, can never say what constitutes their individuality. Therefore, Deleuze traces the tradition of ontological univocity, noting it first in Duns Scotus, in order to think about difference in a new way. Only a univocal, anti-hierarchical ontology of immanence is capable of thinking about difference in itself or of providing difference with its own concept.

At which level does the thinking of Thomas and Deleuze intersect? How shall we conceive this strange connection of two thinkers who seem to be, at first glance, strictly incompatible? For there is no doubt that Deleuze develops throughout all his writings an atheist philosophy of immanence. According to him, the Greek origin of philosophy even coincides with the establishment of an absolute plane of immanence free from any Gods and transcendence. For Deleuze, it is meaningless to dispute whether there is or is not such a thing like a Christian philosophy carrying the signature of Thomas. As long as you fail to identify the immanence with the absolute, as long as you subordinate the immanence to an absolute principle, you remain in the realm of

theology. For the present Deleuze claims that the conflict between philosophy and theology does not constitute any longer a significant line of demarcation, since atheism must not be regarded as a tragedy for the philosopher but as his serenity. In order to establish a firm separation of philosophy from theology, we need to make intelligible the entanglement of their respective concepts in search for a future being that is neither God nor man, but better than both of them. Therefore, Deleuze rejects the dogma of secularisation pretending that modernity, substituting man for God, has regained the real world instead of the transcendent one, when in fact, by doing so, it never escaped from its old plane of thinking, from its prior theological conditioning, since it maintained God and man on the same level, simply reserving the rights of the former to the latter. Modern Philosophy can only acquire a full release from the implicit identity underlying the apparent discontinuity between cause and effect when posing the problem differently, that is to say when creating a new idea of conversion together with a new realm of faith.

Le «chevalier de la foi» de Kierkegaard, celui qui saute, ou le parieur de Pascal, celui qui lance les dés, sont les hommes d'une transcendance ou d'une foi. Mais ils ne cessent de recharger l'immanence : ce sont des philosophes... qui ne se soucient plus de l'existence transcendante de Dieu, mais seulement des possibilités immanentes infinies qu'apporte l'existence de celui qui croit que Dieu existe. Le problème changerait si c'était un autre plan d'immanence. Non pas celui qui croit que Dieu n'existe pas pourrait alors prendre le dessus, puisqu'il appartient encore à l'ancien plan comme mouvement négatif. Mais sur le nouveau plan, il se pourrait que le problème concerne maintenant l'existence de celui qui croit au monde, non pas même à l'existence du monde, mais à ces possibilités en mouvements et en intensités pour faire naître de nouveaux modes d'existence encore, plus proches des animaux ou des rochers. Il se peut que croire en ce monde, en cette vie, soit devenu notre tâche la plus difficile, ou la tâche d'un mode d'existence à découvrir sur notre plan d'immanence aujourd'hui. C'est la conversion empiriste (nous avons tant de raisons de ne pas croire au monde des hommes, nous avons perdu le monde, pire qu'une fiancée, un fils ou un dieu... ). Oui, le problème a changé.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, the extent to which philosophy, up to the end of the 17th Century, ultimately speaks to us, all the time, of God, seems curious to Deleuze. Why is philosophy so compromised with God?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> G. Deleuze & F. Guattari: *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1991: 71.

<sup>2</sup> G. Deleuze, Seminar, 25 November 1980, transl. Timothy S. Murphy, at website: <http://www.imaginet.fr/deleuze/TXT/ENG/251180.html>. See P. Goodchild: 'Why

And what is even more surprising: why does Deleuze's philosophy, in apparent contradiction to its materialistically charged genealogy (Lucretius, Spinoza, Nietzsche), constantly invoke theological themes and thinkers (repetition, choice, vitalism, contemplation as self-enjoyment: Kierkegaard, Bergson, Whitehead, Plotin), ready to retrace a line connecting the prince Mychkin (Dostojevski), Bartleby the scrivener (Melville) and Francesco d'Assisi as historical variations of one and the same figure: the idiot, whose first incarnation was Christ? Again, why is philosophy so compromised with God? Rather than posing this question historically, Deleuze seeks a philosophical motivation when affirming that philosophy since its beginnings revolves around the question of being. That is why philosophy and ontology are fundamentally the same. In fact, ontology can be reduced to one single proposition: "L'Être est univoque."<sup>3</sup> Univocity does not simply mean that being can be conceived in one and the same sense, it also entails that being has to be conceived in one and the same sense with regard to all its intrinsic individuating differences and modalities. Being is the same for all its modalities, but the modalities are not the same. Consequently Deleuze rejects each equivocal idea of being that is necessarily entangled with transcendence. The platonic idea, the emanative or creative transcendence in neo-platonic and Christian philosophers, all hierarchies of being based on participation, degradation or devaluation confirm the primacy of transcendence, that is the primacy of an equivocal concept of being. The suspicion that philosophy is deeply compromised with God derives from one essential thesis: as long as you start from an equivocal concept of being you are not able to think difference in itself, you will not attain a positive concept of difference. That means that you cannot avoid explaining difference in relation to an external reference, in relation to a generic difference and a specific difference that embrace all beings and serve as the uniform basis to determine the individual. Following the same pattern, it needs just a shift to another dimension of being to recognize that the sufficient reason for the existence of the world cannot be found within it.

By means of this preliminary description of an equivocal idea of being, we have almost reached the thinking of Thomas Aquinas. Whenever Deleuze is treating the history of philosophy, he always proposes a new way to deal with it. He belongs to the post-war generation of

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is philosophy so compromised with God?', in: M. Briden (ed.): *Deleuze and religion*, London & New York: Routledge, 2001: 156–167.

<sup>3</sup> G. Deleuze: *Différence et Répétition*, Paris: OUF, 1968: 52.

French philosophers that had suffered too much from the very conventional style of philosophy teaching widely practised in the Parisian high courts of thinking. The history of philosophy, as he mocks, that they taught me was very similar to an enormous school of intimidation: how can you dare to say a single phrase on any philosopher without having plunged into an ocean of secondary literature? How can you dare to think on your own before you are 89? As a result, philosophy was much more like a cemetery of concepts strictly reserved to a handful of chosen gravediggers rather than to laughter without a cat. And Deleuze even complicates the challenge by adding a warning: “Tout philosophe s’enfuit quand il entend la phrase: on va discuter un peu [...] La philosophie a horreur des discussions.”<sup>4</sup> Discussion or communication comes either too early or too late. There is no need to discuss before you have not identified the problem, and there is no need to discuss after having done so. Quoting Bergson, Deleuze claims that posing a problem in the right way is identical with solving it. This procedure is noteworthy for it bans negativity from the area of philosophy. Whenever a philosopher criticizes another philosopher, he necessarily starts from problems that were not the problems of the one he criticised. You never share the same plane of thinking. The only way to access a philosophical system may be to reconstruct the problem that is in the centre of it, the very singular problem for which the respective philosophy was seeking a very unique answer.

It may be reasonable to assert that difference is one of the central items of Thomas Aquinas. Neglecting the distinction between essence and being, greater stress is laid here on the *analogia entis*, the hierarchical organisation of being. The analogy of being can be considered as the core structure of the epistemology of Thomas corresponding to the concept of being as the supreme reference point of his metaphysics. With regard to the following the attention has to be drawn to the, so to speak, functional investigation of Deleuze: What happens to difference if it depends on a transcendent principle? How can difference work on the condition of an equivocal concept of being? The direct presence of Thomas in the writings of Deleuze is quite small. Nevertheless he is mentioned in *Difference and repetition*, his most startling philosophical book. In the chapter “La différence en elle-même” some pages give account of Aristotle’s use of analogy and its transformation through the doctrine of Thomas. In Aristotle’s vocabulary, analogy means proportionated equivalence; the model is:  $a : b = (\text{equals}) c : d$ ; insight stands to

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze & Guattari (1991: 32–33).

intellect as seeing stands to the eye. Disregarding the intricated meanings of analogy in other writings of Thomas, for instance the fine distinctions in *De veritate*, in favour of the simplified theory of analogy exposed in the *Summa theologica* and the *Summa contra gentiles*, two types of analogy have to be distinguished: the analogy of proportionality and the analogy of attribution. On the threshold of ontology and the logic of proposition, the analogical signification cannot be separated from the analogy of being, one is rooted in the other. The 13th investigation in the first book of the *Summa theologica* provides the ultimate basis. Among the multiple names of God, let us say his infinity, simplicity or perfection, the name "he is" is the most adequate name of him. Thus, there is a perfect equality between God and being on condition that you withdraw all other intrinsic determinations from it. What is left is just the most abstract structure of being that precedes all analogical structures of being without indicating therefore a genus. Thomas agrees with Aristotle that being cannot be a genus since genus is not conceivable without its constitutive differences that are supposed to be not already included in the concept of the genus. Thus, if being would indicate a genus, differences in the genus would not exist. And this is precisely impossible.

In other words, the abysmal distance, meaning the difference between the creator and his creatures, is an ontological one. How can we mediate the pure and supreme being of God with all different kinds of beings? This is the task of analogy as a logic of participation in the face of the twofold aporia of an agnostic as well as an anthropomorphic idea of God, either too close, too similar to Man, or too distant to him. On the one hand, there is no relation between God and Man. On the other hand, man is related to God for he created man and the world. This unilateral difference is the very reason for the analogy of attribution based on the *analogia entis*. Nothing can be predicated in the same sense or in a purely univocal mode on God and Man. But at the same time nothing is said about God in a purely equivocal mode. Thomas places the concept of analogy between pure univocity and pure equivocity. Whatever Creator and the creatures have in common, it will be predicated analogically, as Thomas claims in the 34th chapter in the first book of the *Summa contra gentiles*. Thus, Being is said in several senses of man, animal, plant or God. This became the position of Christian orthodoxy: there is indeed a common measure to the form of Being, but this measure is analogical and not univocal.

Before analysing some consequences for the organisation of the immanent being, let us emphasize just one point concerning the couple immanence—transcendence. Thomas raises the question whether God is within all things, whether God is everywhere.<sup>5</sup> According to him, God is immanent in the world through his effects but outside of the world with regard to his essence. For Deleuze, all Christian thinkers are driven by the problem of immanence. While the doctrine of Thomas controls and frames immanence by subordinating it to the requirements of creative transcendence, later theology has to offer proof—and often at the risk of work and life—that the dose of immanence injected into the world and into the mind would not compromise the transcendence of God. On the way from Eckhart via Cusanus to Bruno, this precarious balance finally collapses into pantheism.<sup>6</sup>

Let us come back to the structure of being in the world. In which way does the eminent being of God, the universality and pure indetermination of the *ens commune* succeed in distributing the different series of contingent beings? The ontology of Thomas allows an infinity of different beings or acts of existence. However, due to his distributive and hierarchical concept of being, the reason for each difference is an external one, since it takes a maximum of distinctions between all kinds of beings, a maximum of diversity between all creatures and a maximum of degrees of being to express the supreme being of God by means of similarity, image or trace.<sup>7</sup> How can difference operate here? A theology with so positive ambitions, like that of Thomas, relies on analogy to found new distributive rules for differences proceeding from an equivocal concept of being. So, what went wrong for Deleuze when Thomas took up theologically Aristotle's analogical vision of the world?

L'analogie de l'être implique à la fois ces deux aspects : l'un par lequel l'être se distribue dans des formes déterminables qui en distinguent et en varient nécessairement le sens, mais l'autre par lequel, ainsi distribué, il est nécessairement réparti à des étants bien déterminés, chacun pourvu d'un sens unique. Ce qui est manqué, aux deux extrémités, c'est le sens collectif de l'être, et c'est le jeu de la différence individuante dans l'étant. Tout se passe entre la différence générique et la différence spécifique. Le véritable universel est manqué, non moins que le vrai singulier : l'être n'a de sens commun que distributif, et l'individu n'a de différence que générale.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See *Summa Theologica* I, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Deleuze & Guattari (1991 : 47).

<sup>7</sup> See *Summa contra gentiles* II, 45; *Summa theologica* I, 47.

<sup>8</sup> Deleuze (1968 : 387).

Put differently, analogical Being, whenever related to particular beings, can never say what constitutes their individuality. It retains in the particular (the individual) only what conforms to the general (the concept). Common sense and analogy of being collaborate. For example: Man is an animal rationale. Man is distinguished from “sensual being”, as the generic concept to which he belongs, by the specific difference of rationality. But the specific difference represents in no way an universal concept for all singularities. The specific difference merely designates the particular moment where difference becomes reconciled with the concept in general. A true universal is lacking no less than a true singular. Thomas declares clearly that individuals exist for the sake of the species — “individua enim sunt propter speciem”.<sup>9</sup> In that, however, Deleuze recognizes the principle of a ruinous confusion for the whole philosophy of difference: the attribution of a proper concept of difference is confused with the inscription of difference in the concept in general. All you obtain is merely a conceptual difference instead of the concept of difference.

Against analogy, therefore, Deleuze traces the tradition of ontological univocity, which is the one ontological proposition that ever existed, noting it first in Duns Scotus.<sup>10</sup> By removing difference entirely from the province of representation or equivocal and analogical being, Deleuze preserves the possibility to think difference in a radically new way.<sup>11</sup> Only a univocal ontology is capable of thinking difference in itself or of providing difference with its own concept. This pure ontology is anti-hierarchical, a world of immanence. The doctrine of Duns Scotus, the subtle doctor — here we have to refrain from a full version in favour of a very rough summary — posits not a first being but a univocal being common to God and creatures. If Being is said in one and the same sense of everything that is, than what constitutes the difference between beings, between genus, species and individuals? Being does not have to embark on its long way around the categories, since there cannot be categories in a univocal ontology: if we distinguish beings by their generic or specific differences, then we are back in the analogical vision of the world. In fact, what determines being is an intrinsic mode. Duns Scotus gives the example of the white colour that may exist in

<sup>9</sup> *Summa contra gentiles* II, 59.

<sup>10</sup> Deleuze’s understanding of Duns Scotus relies primarily on Etienne Gilson’s *Jean Duns Scot: Introduction à ses positions fondamentales*, Paris, 1952.

<sup>11</sup> See O. Davies: ‘Thinking difference — a comparative study of Gilles Deleuze, Plotinus and Meister Eckhart’, in: Briden (2001 : 83).

different degrees of intensity without turning therefore into different colour. Intensity predicates an intrinsic degree of whiteness in itself.<sup>12</sup> Thus, being exists in different intrinsic modes without the need to add therefore a new reality. As infinite being, being is God, as finite being, it is creature. Infinity and finite nature are just two different modes, two different intensities of one and the same concept of being. Duns Scotus defends himself against the accusation that the univocity of being would destroy philosophy and theology.<sup>13</sup> However, his opponents had good reasons to fear that the gate was now wide open for breaking the bond between God and creatures as soon as the essence of creature was allowed to be conceived in terms of contingency, individuality and singularity. Indeed, Deleuze's endeavour to create a positive concept of difference, a concept of an individuating difference was deeply attracted by the idea of an individuating entity called *haecceity* as the masterpiece of Duns Scotus.

The thomistic theory of individuation based on the *materia signata* did not satisfy Duns Scotus, because the same matter could cause as well another individual. The very intrinsic determination that constitutes the singularity of each individual is named *haecceity*, which makes the individual irreducible both to specific and generic difference as to simple alterity or diversity. Hence the transition from specific difference to singular difference cannot take place without the addition of an intrinsic perfection to being itself. The scotistic doctrine of *haecceity* aims precisely to point out the individual greater richness of perfection in contrast to the species.<sup>14</sup> Thus, *haecceity* is the last degree of reality, the ultimate perfection of things. Taken as *haecceity*, each individual is totally different from, and has nothing in common with other *haecceities*. Closely linked to the univocal concept of being is the transcendental, generating function of individuating difference, which exceeds the boundaries between different genres. From a distributive and hierarchical idea of being, the new scotistic ontology shifts to a transcendental science. Deleuze aligns himself with Duns Scotus when he renders difference transcendental. Moreover, the *parti pris* by Deleuze for Duns Scotus in his dispute with Thomas becomes the point of depar-

<sup>12</sup> See D. Scotus, 'Lectura in primum librum Sententiarum', distinctio 8, pars 1. 3 [104], in: T. Hoffmann (ed.): *Johannes Duns Scotus—Die Univozität des Seienden. Texte zur Metaphysik*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2002 : 171. See G. Deleuze: *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1968 : 179.

<sup>13</sup> See D. Scotus, *ibid.*, distinctio 3, pars 1 q. 1–2 [110], p. 66.

<sup>14</sup> See E. Bettoni, *Duns Scotus—the basic principles of his philosophy*, Westpoint, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1961 : 63.



ture of his philosophy of difference. Indeed, Deleuze's anarchic political ontology, including individuation by *haecceity*, virtualities, multiplicities and differentiation as transcendental powers—an ontology thoroughly composed of positive intrinsic differences without admitting any negativity—derives more or less directly from Duns Scotus.<sup>15</sup>

There is, however, a very strange but very striking example of the univocal ontology à la Deleuze—an example inseparable from an equivocal understanding of being, raising the question of transcendence or immanence without finding an answer. In *Mille Plateaux* Deleuze and Guattari refer to Spinoza for vindicating the idea that difference is only conceivable as a degree of power. Thus, each individual has its internal measure of perfection. We no longer determine something by its specific and generic difference (for instance, man as a rational animal or featherless biped) but rather what its affective capacities are, since the power of an existing individual is expressed in a certain capacity for being affected. Deleuze is quoting the biologist Jacob von Uexküll and the amazing description of the tick.<sup>16</sup> Its relation to the world is composed by only three affects: first, the smell of butyric acid contained in the sweat of mammals; second, the temperature of 37 degrees corresponding to the blood-temperature of mammals; third, the hairy skin of mammals. Nothing else of the world exists for the tick. The tick hangs motionless on the branch of a tree waiting for a mammal to pass by. If this happens, the smell of the butyric acid pouring out of the glands of the animal signals to the tick to fall down on the mammal. Now the tick is looking for a hairless place on the skin to bore its way under the skin of the prey. After that, the tick pumps a stream of warm blood into its own body. However, this bloody meal is also its final supper since there is now nothing left to do for the tick but to fall down to the ground, lay its eggs and die. We must appreciate the perfection of these actions. During its lifetime the tick is always living at the limit of its degrees of power; a maximal degree when falling down on the mammal, a minimal degree while waiting for the mammal. The same perfection at different

<sup>15</sup> See Goodchild (2001: 160). On the scotism of Deleuze with regard to the univocity of being, see Deleuze (1968: 52–58); with regard to *haecceity* as individuating difference see G. Deleuze & C. Parnet: *Dialogues*, Paris: Flammarion, 1977: 111–114; 169–173; G. Deleuze & F. Guattari: *Mille Plateaux*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980: 309–367; 632–634.

<sup>16</sup> See Deleuze & Guattari (1980: 314); J. von Uexküll: *Streifzüge durch die Lebenswelten von Tieren und Menschen*, Hamburg: Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1956: 23–30; G. Agamben: *L'ouvert—De l'homme et de l'animal*, Paris: Éditions Payot-Rivages, 2002: 69–74.

degrees. In fact, it happens quite rarely that an animal is passing by the tree where the tick hangs waiting. Therefore, the tick possesses the capacity for waiting for a long time without food until its host arrives. But the duration of waiting is beyond human comprehension. The tick can wait up to eighteen years within an unchanging environment, within an unchanging world. Is this perhaps to say that, in the very heart of immanence, we find the longing of the creature for a new world? Let it be a matter of taste or belief to regard this event as a matter of biology, of joke, or of metaphysical wit—it compels to think difference not in an empirical but in a metaphysical sense. Deleuze gives good reasons to believe in it.