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Lorentzen - Re-Constructing Theological Thought with Deleuze - JCRT 1.2

Re-Constructing Theological Thought with Deleuze

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We have abolished the real world; what world is left? The apparent world perhaps?...But no! *With the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!*

--Nietzsche *Twilight of the Idols*

Introduction

By way of introduction I wish to make my interest in Deleuze explicit. This is required by at least three factors: The first is that I have styled the interaction with *Difference and Repetition* as a dialogue (or meditation) consequently, some remarks to set the stage will be helpful for the reader. The second is that I have selected one portion from the text to focus on (albeit one that Deleuze considers to have continuing significance). And finally, my reading of Deleuze contradicts some of Deleuze's own conclusions, since the dialogue functions as a deconstructive reading of *Difference and Repetition*.

3. My interest in Deleuze centers around his desire to think the possibilities of human experience, or to think the "beyond of the human" as Keith Pearson phrases it in *Germinal Life*.^[1] In this study Pearson makes a good argument for seeing Deleuze as particularly interested in deflecting the two types of nihilism that the modern world seems to lead to—that of strict Darwinism and Freud. Deleuze seeks to take seriously the evolutionary and immanent nature of modern thought—that is, to develop his thinking within the confines of a world which has been disabused of its fantasies of the transcendent. These two facets of his thought, the desire to speak beyond the human condition but also in a manner that avoids the excesses of metaphysical illusions, make him a particularly relevant theorist for contemporary theologians. The resistance to fatalism, nihilism, totalitarianism, and closed systems resonant with the theological impulse.
4. Specifically, my interest lies in the application of this impulse to the category of thought. It is for this reason that I focus on Deleuze's chapter "The Image of Thought." In the preface to the English version of *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze writes that this chapter "becomes the condition for the discovery of these two concepts [i.e., difference and repetition]. It is therefore...[that] which now seems to me the most necessary and the most concrete, and which serves to introduce subsequent books". This choice of focus is justified by a larger context, that of the philosophical field in general where thinking *itself* has become a chief category of inquiry and investigation—"Just as the question 'what is writing?' has become the primary concern of modern literature, and the question 'what is art?' for...the arts in general, so the question 'what is thinking?' has become the overriding concern for philosophy."^[2] The logic of modernity began with a disqualification of God or other metaphysical referents in favour of immanent objects. This placed specific types of thinking on the defensive (traditional theology among others) while defining and inscribing the proper or legitimate role of thought. Deleuze, however, recognizes that given the logic of the modern, *thinking anything at all*

becomes problematic. That is, given the narrowly proscribed reason, the logic of identity, and the limits of evolutionary determinism, how can one account for a thinking that is important—i.e., one that *imports* something into thought? How is it possible for thought to transcend the historical, biographical, biological situatedness and contingency of human existence? How is novelty possible? How can one think the possibility of change and growth?

5. These are important questions, and ones that a theological view of the human condition must sympathize with, for they are precisely the question of hope, redemption, salvation....
6. Deleuze offers two strategies (he offers others, but these two are the focus of my review) as a response to this need to account for freedom, change, growth, and human possibility. These are the notion of “difference and repetition” and the notion of a “fractured self.” Both concepts intend, in part, to deconstruct the main trajectory of western thought to date—which is a tradition that focuses on and privileges the categories of identity, of sameness, and the notions of essence or substance as pure forms of identity. The two fronts on which Deleuze fights against this tradition are: its nature as a closed system, and the fact that it locates meaning in the transcendent. The repetition of difference is a way of opening this system up, and Deleuze masterfully demonstrates how the concept of difference is necessary to understand human thought, *and* to ensure the continuation of philosophy.[3] The fractured self is posited against the Cartesian and Kantian reification of the self and seeks to open up the individual to the promise of change, and to the creative (responsive)[4] nature of thought by opening them up to the cracks and fissures that exist in one’s self-concept. Instead of a substantial self that must somehow find a way in which to be meaningfully related to the world, for Deleuze the self is an expression of the World, an instance of the singularities and potentialities that underlie (as a condition of possibility) the phenomenal world. Both constructs allow Deleuze to locate meaning within the flux and occasions of life, instead of postulating an essential meaning in an ideal realm to which the self and thought always seek (woefully) to be adequate. This introduces a telos for the human that liberates and enfranchises thought within the horizon of its (the human’s) plane of possibility, i.e., the immanent. Deleuze draws inspiration from Bergson, Nietzsche, and Spinoza (among others) in his attempt to develop a new “image of thought,” one that is adequate to the concerns he raises. The difference between these thinkers introduces a tension in his thought that my reading of Deleuze seeks to explore.[5]
7. I applaud Deleuze’s interest in these questions, and I am in basic agreement with his critique of the development of the philosophy of identity in the West. However, I am not convinced by the cogency of his alternative. In the area of thinking I believe he is unable to ground “The Image of Thought” that he calls for. This is not primarily because I disagree with his conclusions. Rather, I feel his own text calls for this response—the consequent reading is a deconstruction of Deleuze where the logic of the text pressures the conclusions/assumptions of the text. Since Deleuze delights in the fissures and cracks that appear to unsettle the conventions and concepts of our lives one can only conclude that this is a project with which Deleuze would be in sympathy.
8. The deconstructive effort is the outworking of my impression that the type of thinking that Deleuze calls for is not consistent with his notions of a haphazard, uncontrolled, out-breaking of the raw possibilities that life consists of in its reality. If this were the case, if there was only difference, then one could not distinguish between thinking anything and thinking nothing, between stupidity and the non-stupid, or between craziness and normalcy—if there was only difference, difference would be without meaning. Rather, Deleuze introduces these

distinctions as tropes in an effort to shock or challenge the complacency of our existing structures of thought, precisely because there is something at stake, or because there is a more appropriate—more near the truth—way to respond to the realities of our existence. The same can be said regarding his notion of the fractured “I” or the non-identity of the Self. It is because our stagnant (indulgent) notions of our-Self lead to a paralysis, a loss of nerve, which tragically keeps us from the recognition of our true nature that Deleuze denies the legitimacy of the self. One could even say that he clears the false notion of self away so that the true self may emerge.

9. Another way to approach my deconstructive reading of Deleuze is through the Nietzschean insight in the epigraph. When modernity did away with the transcendent world, it was left not with the mundane or immanent world, for that was done away with as well, i.e., the distinction between the two worlds was no longer relevant. Rather, we have a world which must be composed of both—for the set of data that the transcendent world accounted for did not disappear with the category. Now we have a world that is no longer known or quantifiable since the context or structure of comparison or delimitation has been denied. We have now a world that is mysterious, threatening, and uncontained. Yet, it is a world that must account for the possibility of human change and growth, of hope, love, death, hatred, betrayal, altruism, self-transcendence, insanity,
10. Deleuze is sensitive to this need, to this Nietzschean insight. So my reading claims that he enacts a theological claim in his articulation of the world. In his response to the impasse that the conditions of modernity pose for thinking *anything at all* he ironically makes thinking necessarily theological, i.e., a response to the Other. This I contend is the only way to understand the project that Deleuze outlines. As the following “dialogue” suggests, if thinking and the Self are not a response to the Other, one is left with the futility of infinite choice without any reason for that choice. This leads to its own type of nihilism, or a basic paralysis that would circumvent the possibility of the emergence of difference, openness, and possibility that Deleuze rightfully calls for. It is this feature of Deleuze’s thought that represents a resource to contemporary attempts to think theologically.
11. The dialogue proceeds as an interrogation of Deleuze’s claim that thinking is difficult. It traces out the advice that Deleuze gives on how to think—which in part draws on metaphorical concepts like the “genitality of thinking.” Deleuze brings in Artaud as a way of upping the stakes in the game. I also up the stakes with a quote from Pascal. Artaud and Pascal serve to highlight the demand or necessity of thought, the moral quality of thought, *and* the seeming impossibility of responding to this demand. Artaud raises the ante placed by the modern “image of thought”—i.e., requiring that we think well. Instead, he says, the challenge is to think anything or “something. It is in the context of this, the necessity of thinking *well* and the *real* possibility of failure, that Deleuze crafts his response.

The Dialogue

“All our dignity consists then in thought...Let us endeavour then to think well; this is the principle of morality”

--Blaise Pascal

“There is no doubt...that in fact it is difficult to think”

--Gilles Deleuze[6]

“the problem [is]...simply to manage to think something.”

--Antonin Artaud[7]

11. “To manage to think something.” This comes as a challenge to us today, especially for those whose thinking would be theological. Obviously this something is extramundane, a something which is not anything or everything. (For we are always “thinking” as the common sense would have it.) Yet it is also obviously mundane, a something which could be equally anything or everything. It is a something that cannot be defined at the outset (prior to its thinking). It is something that must be thought to be so demarcated. And since it must be thought it must be thinkable, and thus mundane. But to be that something which is yet to be thought it cannot be (already) mundane. It is a something which cannot be thought yet must be encountered in thought; a something that eludes thought yet must be found in thought for thought to have managed to think something.
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14. Thinking is not self sufficient: “to manage to think something” takes thinking to its own limits, to its end and beginning. Thinking is primarily a reactive and not a creative act. To think something first requires a something to be thought, and this something is “encountered”, it is an event, a happening. This something encountered, if it is to demand a something thought, must be intense, force-ful, intrusive. It must shatter, disturb, un-seat, stumble, thinking in its automaton stride among the anything and everything.
 15. “Let us endeavour...to think well”. (This may well be the moral principle, for it is nigh unto impossible.) To think well, one has to first “manage to think something.” Is it a successful endeavour if one thinks something, is this a moral success? If the success of thinking lies in a previous encounter, sufficient enough in intensity to provoke thought, can thinking claim its something as its own success? By what rule does thinking something succeed or fail? What does thinking do to the something encountered to make it something thought? What is the distinction between a something in encounter and a something in thought?
 16. (“To think well; this is the principle of morality.” Oh tower of perfection which loves despair and knows no adequation—the Kantian imperative in its absolute self-denying, self-affirming, impossibility—“Let us endeavour then to think well...”)
 17. “Let us endeavour then to think well;” Let us endeavour then “to manage to think something.”
 18. Deleuze consoles us: counsels us to “count upon the contingency of an encounter with that which forces thought to raise up”. [8] The contingency of the encounter, this we can count on. What type of counting is that? Is it a counting which sees the contingency of the encountered—an inevitable encounter with a contingent? Or, is it a counting on a contingent encounter—a contingent (possibly not) encounter with an inevitable? How to count on a contingency? This problem remains, “to manage to think something.” What is encountered? What if something is not encountered? What if something is, but not encountered? What if what is encountered is not something—but anything or everything? How is the contingent to be counted upon?
 19. “Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object...of a fundamental encounter”. [9] Let us suppose that Deleuze is right, that there is “something in the world which forces us to think.” Let us suppose that the tone in which this something is introduced

by Deleuze does not allow for a contingency of the something which is “a fundamental encounter.” Does this mean that the encounter is then contingent? But we were just told to “count” on this encounter. The contingent must then refer not to the something to be encountered or the encounter of the something but to the fact that the encounter is outside of thought, is beyond the control of thought, is contingent in regards to the faculty of thought.

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22. This contingent of thought is the impossible of thought. It is however the non-contingent of life, the possible of being. It is the inevitability of the encounter with something which is the originary moment in thought. This originary movement is of great concern, for it holds the only promise for the ability to “think well” or “to manage to think something.” Deleuze suggests three characteristics for this “fundamental encounter”: 1) “it can only be sensed”, 2) it “moves the soul, ‘perplexes’ it—in other words, forces it to pose a problem”, and 3) “it forces thought to grasp that which can only be thought...the Essence: not the intelligible”. [10]
23. This is Deleuze’s description of the thinking which is a managing “to think something.” This is a description of theological thinking. The non-contingent something which is encountered in a non-contingent encounter, but is entirely fortuitous or contingent to thought—exceeds thought; which, further, “can only be sensed”, “moves the soul” and “‘perplexes’ it”, and “forces thought to grasp...Essence”, is God. This something is that which classical theological thought has embraced as its only to be sensed, problematic Essence: which was named God, “that than which nothing greater can be thought.”
24. The limit of thinking brings us to God. This is an old adage, an old wives tale—or the tail of old theologians: A Modern Ruse.... Theological thinking may be thinking on the limits, but this does not help us “manage to think something.” Is thinking something theological?
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27. How is it that thought manages to come back from its limits—to think that which “can only be thought...the Essence:” the unintelligible? How does the limit of thought function to “manage to think something”? The limit of thought, its end, “its natural ‘powerlessness’” is its greatest power. [11] What calls thinking (from or to)? Upon what is thought dependent that its greatest achievement should lay with its paralysis, its incapacity, its stupidity, its impotency, its infertility: “Genital thinking” is an impotent organ...
28. “To think well,” “to manage to think something”, “this is the principle of morality”—thought’s impotency, its premature ejaculation, is made all the more obvious, inevitable, by this pressure: the moral imperative.
29. What calls thinking—a thinking that manages to think something? How is this thinking known—will we know when we think well? Is this not an infinite call, one which goads thought restlessly, relentlessly, recklessly—the unsatisfied lover, the vaginal, abysmal, entrance to the womb of the unthought, yet to be thought, something? This fascination is repulsive, this invitation a rejection; the tireless, nymphomatic, demand of the yet not thought something.
30. Artaud “presupposes an impulse, a compulsion to think”. [12] Then, thinking cannot be resisted, the encounter is not contingent, but is it a thinking which manages to think something? “It is difficult to think”, and the impulse, the compulsion, to think is not inevitable for thought.

The contingent is precisely that thought can resist this impulse, that thinking can be avoided, that thought can be blind, frigid, sterile. (One can avoid God?) This compulsion to think is a primeval force, an “es”; and can give birth to either thought or madness, wisdom or folly, reckoning or retreat. Therefore, the imperative: think well! At what peril, puerile? To think the unthought, “to bring into being that which does not yet exist”, [13] who can attempt such a feat; where are the gods to assist in such a Herculean task—to think the abyss, to think something?

31. Deleuze is undaunted; this feat he calls *fait accompli*--it is an “absolute necessity” an empiricism; not to be marveled at but participated in.
 32. This throws us back again on the non-contingent, the something encountered, the sensible which leads to thought. (Was it rash to call this God?) Thus the refrain, “think well”, the moral demand of thinking is justified because it points beyond itself to the non-contingent encounter with “something in the world which forces us to think” Why did you not think well, how did you not “manage to think something”? Something forces us to think, it is our duty to “engender ‘thinking’ within thought”, for this forcing us to think can be a forcing to stupidity, to not-think. It can be denied, its call is contingent--“thinking is not innate but must be engendered in thought.” [14] The sterile organ, the impotent, the flaccid phallus, must be coaxed, coached, into a performative response which is thinking, a creation of something. “To think is to create”--however, before one can create one must “first of all...engender thinking in thought.” [15] One must manage to think something in order to think something. (This is why thinking is a response--an allowing to be, an empiricism, a creation that is a response. This is why thinking is respons-ible, and why stupidity is not responsive but the inability to respond--a being carried away.)
 33. We are something, this something is not anything or everything, not defined or undefinable but something. Something can engender thinking in thought; something can manage to think something, can manage to create, to think. “A passive self produced by a groundlessness that it contemplates. It is this which engenders thought within thought”. [16] The something encountered is, or produces a self, the awareness of this is the “engendering of thinking within thought.” If the something encountered is the groundlessness which this self contemplates, how can thought be engendered, for as we have seen, the abyss produces a paralysis? Does not this groundlessness call forth thought, is not thought made in its image? Is not the self, the product of the groundless, a manifestation of the groundless? Is not the groundless something?
 34. The face of something, the image, is seen beyond the limit, this is how the limit can engender thought, can “manage to think something.” (This limit is not an end but a beginning.) This is how that which can only be sensed can have a meaning for sense: “what forces sensation and that which can only be sensed are one and the same thing”. [17]
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37. “The mechanism of stupidity is the highest finality of thought.” [18] Does this mean that nothing is the highest finality of something, and something of nothing? Is thought the highest finality of stupidity? Is the abyss the something to be encountered and thought? Is the no-thing then the greatest something, the not-thought the final thought? Is “to manage to think something” to think nothing? What have we called something, is it nothing? What have we called nothing, is it something? What have we called thinking, is it imbecility?

38. "To manage to think something."
39. Beyond thought is something that calls to thought.
40. Stupidity is thought's highest finality; since it is in thinking something that thought is truly realized, but this something is that which is beyond thought. "To manage to think something" is to not think, to go to the limits and beyond of thought. What is there? We have seen it is something not nothing; to think nothing is to think something. This something is not abyss but is abysmal, infinite. It gives rise to something, a self, which is related to the groundless something. The something has a face of self *for* in the contemplation of the beyond the limits, "that which can only be thought...Essence", something is thought: "thinking is engendered in thought". This thought is a creative response, but is a response to something—a response as something—the response of the fractured I, who finds itself a self in the thinking within thought: I think; I am.
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43. The something encountered gives rise to something (a thinking something, a self) which manages to think something. A passive self, made active by the groundless something of its origin—the compulsion to think is a quest for origins. It finds something—in its image—the groundlessness discloses itself: that which can only be sensed, moves the soul, Essence.
44. How can that which is only sensed be thought, or move the soul? How is essence (the non-sensible) known, disclosed? How is it known when one manages to think something? Only through the recognition of self.
45. Deleuze includes memory in the process from sensibility to thought. It is memory which mediates sense to thought, which gives the ability to articulate the inarticulate, to form the formless. Memory of what? Deleuze wants this memory to be an always new, repetition of difference, the eternal return...memory of that which was not, of the not-thought, the not yet thought, something. This is how something is known when it is thought, by a memory of this something, though it is yet a nothing. This memory makes the something always distinct from the anything or everything, for the knowledge of the something is not on the basis of its adequation with anything or everything, or even nothing, but on the basis of an already encounter with something in the world. The knowing of the thought, "something," is an empirical fact. Something is encountered, was encountered, and (seemingly) will be encountered.
46. This empiricism (if it is not obvious already) is a transcendental empiricism. The encounter of something is an encounter beyond the limits of non-transcendental empiricism. The self experiences something which produces the moral demand to think something—a process, an engendering of thinking in thought. This occurs at a level which is known only in its affects, effects; something moves us to think, something is a problem for us, something is grasped beyond thought: Essence. However, something is lost, can be missed, is ignored, slips....The task of thinking something is infinite, it calls thought beyond itself, to sense, to problem, to listening: that thought may respond—as it can only respond—may be responsible, to the infinite. The task of thinking something is first of all the task of encountering something in the world.
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49. Theos in thinking—"that which can only be thought"

50. Thinking the inarticulate leads to the possibilities of self (the horizon of self)–Individuation: (“Stupidity is neither the ground nor the individual, but rather this relation in which individuation brings the ground to the surface without being able to give it form.”[19]) The limit of thought becomes the telos of thought by its disclosure of (the possible) self beyond (outside), thought. Thought is successful to the extent it allows for this infinite call to/of self in something. The moral demand on thought is a demand for a response to “Essence: not the intelligible”. Thinking well, thinking something, theological thinking, is thinking that is an appropriate/adequate response to the something encountered–A response of becoming self in the face of the possibilities of being, (Self).

Notes

1. Keith Ansell Pearson, *Germinal Life* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 82
3. “Deleuze seeks to undermine the idea of knowledge that is implied in the transcendental model of modern metaphysics, which, he argues, is a model and form of *recognition* (between self and world, or subject and object, and self and other). Construed in terms of a model or form of recognition, philosophy is unable to open itself up to that which exceeds its faculties and the norms it imposes on their operation (the aberrant, the anomalous, the fuzzy, the indiscernible, and so on).” *Ibid.*, p. 89.
4. I develop the notion of the responsive nature of thought (thought as *respons-able*) in *Recovering Fideism*, Unpublished Dissertation, Syracuse University: 1999, p. 112f.
5. See Todd May, “Difference and Unity in Gilles Deleuze” in *Gilles Deleuze and the Theater of Philosophy*, C. Boundas & D. Olkowski, eds., (New York: Routledge, 1994).
6. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). With the exception of the preceding reference to Pascal, all the following quotes are taken from this book.
7. Paraphrased by Gilles Deleuze, p. 147.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 140, 141 & 144 respectively.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 144-5.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

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