

## DIFFERENCE AS PRODUCTION AND LIMITATION

. . . in place of something which distinguishes itself from other things, imagine something which distinguishes itself—and yet in distinguishing itself it does not distinguish itself from the others.<sup>1</sup>

—Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*

Philosophy is crowded with notions of difference. Paul de Man's means different from something. In *Allegories of Reading*,<sup>2</sup> he shows how we use figurative language by establishing its difference from literal language; the figurative and literal depend on each other by each laying their foundation across the other's back. The patrons for this agitated difference are Hegel, and Kojève's Hegel, and the master/slave dialectic.

Deleuze has his own difference, one inspired by Nietzsche. It implies self-differentiation: simple difference, not different from something. Instead of difference between things, we have a produced differentiation within something. Instead of understanding and acting through the process of tense opposition, acts and things understand themselves by unilaterally limiting and distinguishing their meaning. When Deleuze uses the term 'difference,' he is not signalling the forces of opposition to begin their struggle, he is recognizing that some things don't need struggles. And if there is a struggle, it amounts to nothing more than a mock battle constructed by difference as a medium for its own action. For Hegel, the struggle was not at all simulated; it was a life-and-death battle about slavery. In his *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche responded that the master had nothing to fear from the slave; the slave reduced to a constructed stage-prop or a homemade puppet the master toyed with. Far from being a threatening outsider, Nietzsche's slave is the master's own amusing and self-serving creation. Deleuze fits into

the history of philosophy right here. For him, contrast and challenge and the dialectic become props for difference. If they exist, difference manufactures them. Difference generates its own meaning, definitions, and limits.

### Difference for Itself

A finger turns in light circles across your toes and the pads of your feet. Is this irritating? ticklish? erotic? relaxing? According to difference, the delineation does not usher from an exterior source, like the masseur telling you to relax or a social norm insisting that when your wife does this it is sexual and when your doctor does this it is not. Instead, let the physical action define the borders and meaning. Think of fingers curling over a foot's toes and running down toward the heel. Imagine it, and only it. Not your foot, a foot. The fingers have no arm and no identity. The entire episode takes place without a background, without any time or place or situation. This instantiates the experience difference proposes. The material produces and defines its own sensations. It itself creates the episode. Tickling? Disturbing? What the event is and what it feels like arise on the scene.

When you add things from outside the immediate site, you move to a second kind of experience. Add that the foot is yours, and that the fingers belong to a professional masseur. Everything formalizes. The scene glides into the well travelled experience of relaxing because we know a massage is supposed to relax because we read it on the sign before going in.

Two separate experiences come to be in accordance with two unrelated rules. One extends from difference in the form of unilateral distinction, it is blind and deaf to anything beyond. Another works through definitions imposed, through background noise like customs and prosaic language and socialized patterns. I use Deleuze to focus on the first experience.

### Restricted Ontology

Deleuze postulates:

. . . difference is that by which the given is given.<sup>3</sup>

and:

Being is Difference.<sup>4</sup>

Normally, philosophic claims about the inauguration of experience, about being, have monstrously far-reaching effects: they stretch through all reality. The breadth is natural for the Platonic tradition, understanding everything in terms of an original condition or final destiny. Either way, the world wraps into ultimate perfection. Socrates referred to the ideas, Augustine invoked God, Kant proposed the kingdom of ends. No matter the version, fundamental claims about experience incline toward the first state or the last; they tend to cover everything by default.

Deleuze's difference makes no claims about ultimate perfections. Difference's primary claim involves experience's fluid, progressive, continuing generation. Originating is no longer one place back there in the hazy metaphysical past but a grinding process constantly staking out a claim to beginning in the present. With this distinction between origins referencing the past and working the present, the philosophy of being splits. Deleuze's difference functions only in the limited, situated event it currently produces—it inclines nowhere beyond its particular moment. Difference always works here and now. Space and time are no longer fodder for overcoming as they were for Socrates, Augustine, and Kant; they are no longer vulgar obstacles on the way to universality and eternity. Naive space and everyday time satisfy difference, they give it all the room it needs. Everything localizes. Here and now, difference makes the world without awakening Socratic monsters of generality.

Coming at the same point from the other side, difference's relentless localization implies things left out. For example, dieting eludes difference's rules. Dieting is driven by a perfect state always exterior to and always preceding the actual practice.

But exceptions cannot impinge on Deleuze. Difference still works inside the particular experiences it generates and defines. When a hand turns over a foot without the attached idea of a wife or a masseur, there is still experience. Or, when Duchamp leans a urinal against the wall of the museum's display room, there is not, at first, art, and there is not a bathroom, but there is still experience. Or, when you are very young and your best friend announces a set

of unusual sexual proclivities, there is not sexuality and there is not friendship, but there is still experience. And, crucially, the questions ringing these episodes are not about which experience, not about perspectives. They are questions about experience itself. Drive deeper than epistemology, drive to the origin. Difference composes occurrences now and from inside. It joins your back and the hands of another into a slow rolling wave of skin, muscle, and bone; it creates a nervous agitation from a museum display room; it makes a social encounter into downcast eyes and the furtive search for a door.

Now we have a paradox: difference operates on the fundamental level generating discrete experiences, but it also admits some valid, right, or true being may be left outside and come to be at the hands of other rules. Philosophy's tolerance of the situation depends on a re-evaluation. Socrates started with every important experience and insisted that his philosophy stretch out to meet them—he employed a notion of the whole as global imposition. But whatever difference explains, it explains by its own standards. Thus it itself standardizes the whole of experience. The whole is generated on the spot, not imposed. Therefore, what Socrates would consider less than the perfect whole becomes perfect in the context of difference because difference recognizes nothing beyond its relatively narrow territory. It works rigorously, but only on its designated subject. When Deleuze writes "Being is Difference," he does not mean all being necessarily reduces to the production of difference. "Being is Difference" means that being as difference is that being brought into existence and saturated by difference's regulations.

The succeeding two chapters elaborate some of those regulations, but here, stay focused on difference's paradox. It can be rendered in sharper terms. Socrates imagined the whole encompassed its parts and was by definition superior. For difference, the perfect whole sits on the same shelf as its parts. It is one among many, like a part that has taken the name of the whole. It is a qualified perfection or a limited whole. It claims no priority over its own members because without the Socratic valorization of beginning or end, perfection has no necessary precedence. Deleuze seizes onto this. His difference grants us a framework wherein the part can be adequate to, even exceed, the whole.

Examples of this commonplace but still revolutionary truth

are everywhere. Take an ironic case from philosophy's history, the comparison between Alcibiades and Socrates. Plutarch wrote that Alcibiades exceeded every Greek in every imaginable category of judgment. Plato himself called Alcibiades the man who lacked nothing. He was stunningly beautiful, keenly intelligent, witty, rich, an unparalleled military commander, a leading politician. Socrates was something less: short, loathsomely ugly, a foot soldier, financially barely self-sufficient. Socrates is only a fraction of what Alcibiades is. And Alcibiades is the perfect whole. Yet Plato insists through his dialogues that Socrates is the superior. He insists that somehow Alcibiades should and even did envy that man who had in every way less. From the *Symposium*: "[Socrates] is the only person in whose presence I experience a sensation of which I might be thought incapable, a sensation of shame. . . ."<sup>5</sup> Alcibiades's shame is Socrates exceeding Alcibiades is the part exceeding the whole. Plato, presumably the first guru of the whole as unsurpassable, unwittingly or intentionally admits evidence that the part can be more. For another example, take an average philosophy journal article. You can make it better simply by cutting it down. Nothing needs to be added, just take words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and sections out. Then take the shorter article and set it next to its longer parent. The longer version has every idea contained in the shorter. It has those and more. But the shorter one is better. Better because when you read an article you do not evaluate it against some final or original whole which would be the fantastic, perfect, and complete article. You read in accordance with the rules the article itself sets up. So a shorter article with less information can be superior. This situation makes sense only if the article itself generates the measure for marking its success and failure. And this is exactly difference's stipulation. The elements difference commands distinguish and define themselves. They give themselves the value they merit. The article obeys difference's rule, so less can be more.

Return to the claim that difference is both the genesis of being and limited in its scope with respect to being. Philosophic reflection on the deepest roots of experience continues after Deleuze, but now without having to check every claim with respect to every significant occurrence. Difference is a restricted ontology.<sup>6</sup> If difference explains a certain event, then understand and deploy difference in that one slim place. Socrates finds this intolerable, but difference stretches out its own field and acts there.

## Difference's Fields

Where does difference stretch out and work? Three romantic examples: art, love, insanity. Difference explains how you can be under the spell of a certain piece of music and declare with all sincere confidence that this is the great composition, the definition of beauty, then later have the same unshakeable certainty and make the same pronouncement about another composition. This is not simply changing your mind. You refuse to renounce the earlier judgement even while making one irreconcilable with it. Are you deranged? rash? a critic clamoring for attention even at the cost of your reputation? On occasion, no. Difference enters here by operating twice through the same subject. In one field a beauty is erected—even stronger—the possibility of beauty is erected, and in a separate field a separate construction. In both, the definition of beauty comes from the origin of being, thus it rests imperturbable. Meanwhile, from some global, Socratic perspective, the two views contradict abrasively. But difference maintains there is no global perspective, only internally generated value. This qualification is not a diminution. Difference's generated beauty is not incomplete and weak but overperfect and vigorous. The absence of Socratic Beauty allows a restricted beauty without substantial qualification, it allows an absolute one—absolute because there is nothing against which it pales.

The same in love. You swear you love somebody forever, and some night, five years later, she rolls over and you hear her waiting. Finally she gathers herself and says, "I guess you don't love me anymore." You agree it's true. Is your heart pitifully soft? Does your commitment amount to nothing more than facile convenience? Socrates makes the accusations, and he's usually right; the paradox separating what you are saying now from what you said then betrays your irresolution, your fragility, your lies. But in an isolated circumstance, in difference's circumstance, what you said then can remain true even after admitting it is no longer there. You can love somebody permanently, you can have said that, and refuse to deny it and still take responsibility for it, and still know that it is true, and also say that now, nonetheless, I don't love you anymore. Only difference can explain this by producing a certain time and its meaning from within the pronouncement and without reference to a universal temporality or even to the minutes and hours we all

share. In difference, forever has nothing to do with calendars, it has to do with the slender, incorruptible world generated from lovers' words.

Finally, insanity also subscribes to a restricted ontology. After enduring and learning from a severe mental breakdown, Scott Fitzgerald wrote: ". . . the test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise."<sup>7</sup> Difference rules Fitzgerald's definition of first rate intelligence. Or, two distinct differences, but differences having nothing to do with differences between two ideas, having nothing to do with opposition. The differences each confine themselves, they turn everything in, they limit themselves while being absolute. Thus, Fitzgerald can be hopeless without qualification and determined without qualification.

### Interrogating Difference

How do we think difference? Through examples, example after example after example. And in every case, not through identity. Deleuze faults the tradition for mutating difference into an indirect philosophy of static unity. Socrates began by forcing thought to align itself with the sun outside his cave. Traditional notions of difference have never broken away. In a specific case of this predicament, thinking through concepts has constrained the effort. Deleuze writes that in this case ". . . difference is only able to be a predicate in the comprehension of the concept."<sup>8</sup> The subject of the concept—difference—suffers enslavement to the formal conditions of conceptualization. And these conditions belong on identity's level because concepts work in important ways like Platonism's ideas: they gather up their particular members and, in the gathering, sap the members' productive force. Concepts postulate that you are what you are because you fit in this spot, because of the framework the concept has already provided and is now imposing. A static structure closes its iron fist around a producing nature. From here, a notion of internal self-differentiation can rise, but only a derivative notion, one constrained by an inimical and prior structure of conceptualization.

In his later work, notably in *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze will

come to embrace concepts, even assign to philosophy the task of actively constructing them. Deleuze does not change his mind. Instead he redefines what a concept is by understanding what it means to make concepts within the framework of difference. At this earlier stage, however, Deleuze is rallying against the specific practice of conceptualization that the Platonic tradition bequeaths the West. Platonism understands concepts following the model of metaphysical ideas; stolid frames imprison difference by always understanding it in terms of the unshakeable identities Socrates saw outside the cave. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze labors to think the other way: the self-differentiating world governs prefabricated structures. Instead of thinking difference through a concept, accept concepts and all of identity's products as themselves products of a prior, internal differentiation. In other words, start from difference on its own territory.

Start from difference on its own territory by exchanging philosophy as theoretical discussion, like Socrates in the agora, for philosophy as use. What Deleuze focuses on, and what he weighs in the end, are the products of thinking. Instead of asking why and how his theory works, he asks: does difference prove its utility? What can it explain? Deleuze proposes difference and shoves it out among us. He wants to know if difference fits, does it come through when we write and when we understand? This does not reduce theoretical concerns to irrelevance, and Deleuze does not refuse to formulate responses to objections of that kind, but before taking up self-critical worries (like Socrates always wanting to know how his philosophy got started, *eros* he answered), Deleuze wants to exercise his difference. So when questions are asked of Deleuze, they should come through the world. At least initially, they should all be forms of this: how does difference work with particular experience?

Admittedly, this is nebulous. The criteria for determining whether or not difference excels philosophically have not graduated from the shifting indistinctness inherent to earthbound reality—one still does not know exactly how to grade work in Deleuze's philosophy. The problem is endemic. Because difference as philosophy starts from the midst of the changeful physical world, Deleuze chooses his metaphors from here, he likes the term 'force,' for instance. Force summons material connotations: matter in motion striking and transforming. Nothing is safe, nothing

immune to being bent or melted or dropped or colored or reconstituted. Since the determination of whether or not a philosophy succeeds must establish itself at least partially on the level of its rhetoric, for someone like Socrates, the evaluating questions happen on the level akin to the metaphors of ideas, the permanent, clear level. But for Deleuze, who prefers material, evaluating methods gravitate toward physical force's level, the impermanent and murky. Here, what we have for ends, for successes, are constantly being eroded, painted over, cut up. If any more enduring criteria for measuring difference arise, they will rise from a separate kind of philosophic ground. They are not my concern. My concern: focus on the immediate process. If difference is working, let it go, even push it along. Exercise Deleuze in the world.<sup>9</sup>

In the next two chapters, I develop cases of difference in experience more complex and instructive than those I have dashed through here. I am looking for cases of unilateral distinction, of being generating its own limits. To sharpen the presentation, I artificially divide the subject into two discrete aspects, first production, then limitation. The distinction violates difference by leashing it to concepts grounded in identity. But on Deleuze's thinking field, theoretical concerns always take a backseat to practical results; determine whether or not a presentation works before determining whether or not it should work. This is the route out of identity and Platonism generally. It does not run through direct attacks on Socrates, instead through betrayal. Accept identity, but only as incorporated into the work of difference.

Next, difference as production drives Nietzsche's eternal return and invigorates Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. Then, difference as limitation will circumscribe Foucault's philosophic theory of transgression and define Bataille's literary presentation of perversion.