Review

Conditions of Thought: Deleuze and Transcendental Ideas
by Daniela Voss


Keith Crome, Manchester Metropolitan University

Daniela Voss’ monograph was ‘born out of a feeling of astonishment’ (1) – the feeling most proper to philosophy, if we follow Aristotle – occasioned by Gilles Deleuze’s description of his philosophy of the 1960s as a ‘transcendental empiricism.’ (1) From the very off, then, her book presents itself as a philosophical study, arising from a philosophical impulse, of the philosophical writings of a philosopher whose work has not always been studied or appropriated philosophically. As welcome as such an approach is – and it is one that Voss’ study realises admirably – it rests on a series of decisions that are, in certain respects, worthy of question.

Voss channels her astonishment by asking ‘in what way is [Deleuze’s] philosophy transcendental?’ (1) This is undoubtedly an important question to ask and one that until recently had received little sustained attention1 – although it does appear to sideline some equally important questions: for example, it could equally be asked, ‘in what way is

1 See James Williams’ review of Levi R. Bryant’s Difference and Givenness: Deleuze’s Transcendental Empiricism in Parrhesia, No. 9, 2010, pp. 115 – 19. Williams begins by observing that, ‘Three deep philosophical questions have to-date remained without comprehensive answer in Deleuze scholarship […]’ The first that he lists is, ‘In exactly what way, if at all, is Deleuze’s philosophy transcendental?’

Keith Crome, KSO 2014,
Review of Daniela Voss,
Conditions of Thought: Deleuze and Transcendental Ideas
www.kantstudiesonline.net
© 2014 Keith Crome & Kant Studies Online Ltd.
Deleuze’s philosophy empirical?” or even, ‘what sense does it make to speak of a ‘transcendental empiricism?’ – an oxymoronic notion, if not an outright contradiction in terms. This is not to say that the question guiding Voss’ enquiry is without justification or fundamentally flawed – as if she had failed to address the crucial issue (or issues) that Deleuze’s self-characterisation raises. Nor is it to say that Voss ignores such questions entirely. Rather, it is to point to her particular way of focalizing her study, which is the source of its insights and its contribution to the understanding of Deleuze’s work as much as it is its omissions, and without doubt Voss’ monograph will come to be regarded as an indispensable resource for those seeking to engage seriously with Deleuze’s philosophy.

The aim of Voss’ study is ‘to extract a Deleuzian concept of the transcendental from his philosophy of the early period, in particular *Difference and Repetition*, (5) his ‘magnum opus’. (18) As this suggests, *Difference and Repetition* is not the sole focus of *The Conditions of Thought*, but it is the main one. Whilst Voss makes extensive use of several other works published between 1962 and 1968 (*Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962); *The Critical Philosophy of Kant* (1963); *Bergsonism* (1966)), she largely leaves to one side the *Logic of Sense* (1969) – which has some claim to being as important as *Difference and Repetition* – and the books on Sacher-Masoch (1967) and Spinoza (1968). Voss does not leave unremarked her infrequent appeal to the *Logic of Sense*; it is justified by the claim that the philosophical framework of that work is substantially different from the one deployed in *Difference and Repetition*. The former, she claims, is concerned with ‘rethinking the transcendental’, (13) whilst the latter is concerned with the ‘ontological distinction between bodies and corporeal sense events’, (13) and for this reason she argues it ‘should be treated in its own right.’ (13) Whilst it is
necessary to limit the scope of a monograph if it is to treat its subject in sufficient detail – and Voss’ study is detailed and careful – the rationale for the restriction is not unproblematic. It seems to suppose that it is possible to distinguish between the ontological and the transcendental, a distinction that is coeval with the modern philosophical paradigm that Deleuze otherwise – and by Voss own admission – seeks to put into question.

To achieve her aim Voss undertakes a sustained demonstration of the contortions through which Deleuze puts Kant’s notion of the transcendental, appropriating it in a way that results in a philosophy very different in spirit from that of Kant. For example, Voss tells us that in contrast to Kant, Deleuze is not concerned to discover a ground for the possibility of experience, does not compile a table of categories, does not perform a transcendental deduction of a priori conditions, and refuses the notion of a transcendental subject. Instead, ‘Deleuze precipitates transcendental philosophy into a ‘groundlessness’’, (2) ‘dissolves the representational domain into a sub-representational play of intensities or pure differences’, (2) and rather than admitting a transcendental subject that would represent the world, he ‘seeks a point of view beyond representation, that is an a-subjective and unconscious transcendental field.’ (2)

So different, then, is Deleuze’s conception of the transcendental from that of Kant, that Voss is at one point moved to admit that he uses the term ‘in an entirely modified meaning’. (25) Such an admission cannot help but raise the suspicion that the comparison with Kant might be undermotivated, if not wholly arbitrary. Even if it is accepted that in every genuinely creative philosophical enterprise there is a more or less violent appropriation of the ideas and practices of previous philosophers, a meaning that is ‘entirely modified’ would appear to have only a nominal connection with that of which it is a supposedly a modification.
Thus, whilst by virtue of the contrasts it entails the comparison might throw into relief the ‘radicality’ of certain aspects of Deleuze’s philosophical project, it nevertheless runs the risk of leaving unilluminated the philosophical and historical conditions for the transformation of the transcendental that Deleuze is held to enact. In this respect, the rationale for Deleuze’s retention of the term in his paradoxical description of his philosophy as a ‘transcendental empiricism’ would remain unexplained.

In a certain sense, Voss is aware of this. In her Introduction she observes that given the ‘fundamental differences between Kant and Deleuze there need to be other and stronger reasons for Deleuze to adopt the concept of the transcendental.’ (2) She finds one such reason in the idea or notion of necessity implied in the transcendental relation. Nevertheless, the notion of necessity as it used in this respect by Deleuze is markedly different in its meaning from the sense it has in Kant. For Kant, transcendental necessity establishes a necessary relation between concepts and objects, and the necessity involved gives expression to the fact that ‘some conditioned would be impossible, if not for some condition’. For Deleuze, by contrast, transcendental necessity names that which forces us to think – and what forces us to think is the encounter between thought and the outside world, which is conceived by Deleuze (in contrast to Kant) as a true exterior. We might wonder, then, if this appeal to the notion of necessity gives a sufficient explanatory justification for Deleuze’s retention of the notion of the transcendental, since the difference between the Kantian and Deleuzian conception of the former seems as great as is the difference between their conceptions of the latter. Of course, it might be argued that this notion of that

---

which forces us to think still names a relation between a condition and a conditioned – the exterior being the condition that conditions thought. In fact, given the title of her study, I imagine Voss would not have too much disagreement with such a claim. However, to identify the two types of necessity in this way, assimilating the latter to the former, would be to cover over what is at stake in the transformation of the sense of the transcendental from Kant to Deleuze, namely the establishment of a relation between thought and ‘the outside’.

If, in this sense, Deleuze’s adoption of the term ‘transcendental’ still seems something of a puzzle, to turn this into a criticism of Voss’ study would be unfair. In the detail of her argument, Voss does much to elucidate the way in which Deleuze contorts Kant’s critical project through his creative appropriation of a range of ‘post-Kantian’ (266) thought and thinkers – most notably, Salomon Maimon, Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson and the mathematicians Albert Lautman, Karl Weierstrauss and Bernhard Riemann. Not only does this distinguish her monograph from other monographs on Deleuze and Kant, and on Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism – all of which have appeared only in the last decade – it serves to show that Deleuze’s work is part of a longer tradition of the radicalisation (and perhaps even the overcoming) of Kant’s critical philosophy. There are, however, two quibbles possible here. First, there is a striking omission of any sustained reference to Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza – striking since, as Henry Somers-Hall has observed, Deleuze ‘responds to Kant with the resources of Spinozism.’ Second, one might again want to object that of the particular group of philosophers that Voss focuses on, Nietzsche and

---

3 Henry Somers-Hall ‘Review of Kant and Spinozism: Transcendental Idealism and Immanence from Jacobi to Deleuze by Beth Lord’ in Kant Studies Online 2014, p. 161.
Bergson can be characterised as ‘post-Kantian’ only in the sense of having lived and written after Kant, rather than in the sense of having adopted a Kantian foundation in order to go beyond Kant. But the last objection might more reasonably be aimed at Deleuze than Voss, who as Voss notes, ‘understands philosophy fundamentally as critique’, (1) and who, in Nietzsche and Philosophy, not only suggests that Nietzsche’s philosophical project is a turning of critique against Kant – surely, a questionable claim in itself – but himself demands a ‘rethinking and radicalisation of Kant’s critical project’. (1)

Thus, whilst noting that Deleuze’s transcendental philosophy is very different from Kant’s, Voss begins her study from the intuition that Deleuze is concerned throughout his early works to make a critique of what he calls the dogmatic Image of thought. The dogmatic Image of thought, which with a few notable exceptions aside stretches from Antiquity to the present, and which denotes the ‘whole organisation which effectively trains thought to operate according to the norms of an established order or power’, (19) is one that privileges identity over difference, and subordinates thinking to the requirements of representation, and to truth and knowledge. According to Deleuze, it serves to enforce both good-sense and common-sense, and Deleuze submits it to criticism because of its deeply conservative and moral character, and because it obstructs the genesis of a thought that because it opens beyond itself on to an outside ‘is capable of calling forth an absolute, wholly unpredictable, and new, future.’ (20)

Kant occupies an ambiguous position in this way of picturing philosophy. Deleuze regarded him both negatively, as ‘an enemy’, and positively, as ‘the analogue of a great explorer.’ (265) As Deleuze puts it in Nietzsche and Philosophy, ‘Kant is the first philosopher who understood critique as having to be total and positive as critique. Total
because “nothing must escape it”; positive, affirmative, because it cannot restrict the power of knowing without releasing other previously neglected powers. Yet, for all that, ‘there has never been a more conciliatory or respectful total critique’ than Kant’s: whilst Kant directed his criticism towards claims of knowledge and truth, he did not criticise knowledge and truth themselves, and whilst he likewise criticised all claims to morality, he did not criticise morality itself. It is for this reason that Deleuze’s encounter with Kant ‘must be understood as a resumption of critical philosophy and a radicalisation of critique that bears on the presuppositions of Kant’s original project itself’, (266) most specifically, his uncritically dogmatic commitment to the values of knowledge and truth. There is much in this last claim with which Kantians will want to take issue, yet some of the very best of Voss’ excellent expositions of Deleuze’s arguments are devoted to his criticisms of Kant. Of particular interest is the account she gives of Deleuze’s criticism of Kant’s subreptitious deduction of the transcendental from the empirical in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. It is here that we are given the argument that inspires Deleuze’s radicalisation of the Kantian concept of the transcendental on the basis that ‘Kant seeks to ground knowledge on the basis of principles that are the result of a completely a priori deduction’, (24) thereby ‘interiorising the relation between thought and the exterior world.’ (24) But since these principles are themselves abstracted from empirical acts of consciousness, Kant’s account of the a priori structure of cognition traps us in a seemingly in-escapable enclosure of an illegitimately eternalised *doxa*. Paradoxically, this all too concrete derivation of the transcendental categories gives us an all too abstract and absolute image of thought, which does not relate thought to the real

---

forces that form it. Effectively, then, for Deleuze Kant’s transcendental principles are doubly compromised – they are too far from the actual and so are not capable of generating real experience, and too close to it and so are not truly transcendental. In wrestling thought from the dogmatic Image that has captured it and stultified it, and by re-visioning the transcendental, Deleuze aims to account for the genesis of real experience, and to thereby restore to thought its capacity for invention, for creation, for activity, and this, paradoxically, entails restoring its connection to an ‘outside’ that is able to affect it.

Voss devotes the entire first chapter of *Conditions of Thought* to an examination of Deleuze’s notion and criticisms of the dogmatic Image of thought, and in the subsequent three chapters elaborates Deleuze’s positive re-working of the transcendental. The second chapter provides an account of what Deleuze sees as the real, genetic transcendental conditions of thought – the forces that determine ‘the sense and value of what we feel, say or think.’ (14) In her exposition of this aspect of Deleuze’s philosophy, Voss shows how in order to develop his account of the transcendental genetic conditions of thought, Deleuze productively appropriates aspects of Nietzsche’s philosophy – in particular the idea of the will to power – and Salomon Maimon’s conception of ‘differentials of consciousness’, or differential Ideas of consciousness. The latter is worthy of remark for at least two reasons. First, whilst scholarly attention to Maimon has increased (in no small part because of Deleuze’s appeal to and use of this otherwise little known philosopher), and whilst there is now an English translation of Maimon’s *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy*, there is still sufficiently little to ensure that the extensive treatment

---

given here is of considerable interest. Second, Maimon’s *Essay* was the first attempt to develop a form of critical philosophy which, under the guise of improving on Kant, in effect extended the critical enterprise not only beyond Kant but turned it against the limitation of Kant’s philosophy. In this sense, it can be regarded as one of the key historical precondition for Deleuze’s own enterprise. In particular, Voss is to be commended for her patient and lucid account of the differential calculus, which informs Maimon’s notion of differentials Ideas which he holds to provide an account of the genetic conditions of real experience, and which Deleuze critically appropriates in his own concept of virtual Ideas belonging to a differential unconscious. These pages are too extensive and too detailed to summarise, but they are beyond question a necessary reference for anyone interested in this aspect of Deleuze’s philosophy.

In the third chapter, Voss continues the discussion of Deleuze’s theory of Ideas, making a close comparison with Kant’s account of the Ideas of pure reason, and in the fourth she shows how the transcendental conditions of thought, when conceived of in terms of ‘genetic and differential Ideas endowed with a problematic character’, (14) imply the notion of a split subject that must confront itself as an Other. The interest of this last is that it is at this point, after having elaborated Deleuze’s conception of the transcendental by way of contrast with Kant’s conception of it, and having shown ‘the sources of its inspiration’ as well as its novelty, that Voss is able to show how Deleuze’s philosophy not only challenges Kant but also German Idealism. The latter transforms the transcendental subject into the absolute subject, and with Hegel it does this by finding in the antinomical character of reason the very dynamic that drives the life of spirit. However, it accomplishes this at the cost of enclosing it in a circle of conceptualisation, whilst for Deleuze it is
precisely the split in the transcendental subject that opens it beyond conceptuality and to the outside.

Putting to one side my own hesitations and questions, which are directed as much at certain aspects of Deleuze’s philosophy as they are at Voss’ presentation of it, Conditions of Thought is an impressive work on many counts. It elucidates a puzzling aspect of Deleuze’s characterisation of his philosophy, and makes a valuable contribution not only to the understanding of Deleuze’s work but to the understanding of the implications and destiny of critical philosophy as such.