

# Gilles Deleuze's Philosophy of Freedom

Fred Amrine

*After all, what would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeable and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower's straying afield of himself? There are times in life when the question of knowing whether one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.*

—Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, read by Gilles Deleuze at Michel Foucault's funeral

Rudolf Steiner's *Philosophy of Freedom* appeared in 1894, exactly 100 years after the two revolutionary works that chiefly influenced it: Schiller's *Aesthetic Education of Man* and Fichte's *Science of Knowledge*. Another century later, in 1994, two equally revolutionary philosophical works by the great French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) first became available in English: *Difference and Repetition* and *What is Philosophy?*<sup>1</sup> This symmetry is already compelling, but it extends further: in each instance, philosophical breakthroughs were achieved in response to a failed revolution.

In the case of Fichte and Schiller, it was, of course, the failure of the French Revolution, which became abundantly clear in the Reign of Terror of 1793. Both Fichte and Schiller argue that the failure of the Revolution was ultimately a failure of imagination in the broadest sense, and, in response, both mount radically new philosophies in which the creative imagination stands as the central faculty. In the case of Steiner, it was the failure of Nietzsche's revolution in philosophy. In the case of Deleuze, it was the failure of the French "revolution" of May 1968, in which students took to the streets, rallying under the motto "*L'imagination au pouvoir!*"— *All power to the imagination! But this*

*event, this irruption of pure becoming,*<sup>2</sup> as Deleuze would call it, also failed to transform thinking and thus had no hope of succeeding.

Like so many of his contemporaries, Deleuze was shaken by the events of 1968, but unlike most others', his response was, I believe, genuinely transformative: a radical epistemology that crosses the threshold into a direct experience of the living force that both Steiner and his predecessors called 'Imagination'.

I share Yeshayahu Ben-Aharon's admiration for this "most significant French thinker of the 20th century," and I am inspired to respond to his call for engagement by imagining a sort of virtual dialogue between Steiner and Deleuze.<sup>3</sup> Like Steiner, Deleuze is nearly impossible to paraphrase; like Steiner's, his writings are prolific, challenging, imaginative, and highly original. But even if it cannot do him justice, I hope that this brief essay will at least convey my own sense of excited discovery, and that it will encourage others to engage Deleuze.

## Knowing Freedom

Deleuze rejects logic's "infantile idea of philosophy" (*What is Philosophy?* 22): as Wittgenstein had argued before him, everything important in philosophy cannot be "said" – cannot be captured in propositional form; rather, it can only be "shown" to the imagination. Steiner is equally emphatic in *The Philosophy of Freedom*: "Words cannot indicate what a concept is; they can only indicate the presence of a concept." The living concept itself must be experienced by what Deleuze calls a "transcendental empiricism." In a brilliant metaphor, Deleuze compares propositional thought-structures to the devices of Baroque emblems, which represent only an abstract schema of the living event that is "shown" in the rich and dynamic iconography of the accompanying image.<sup>4</sup>

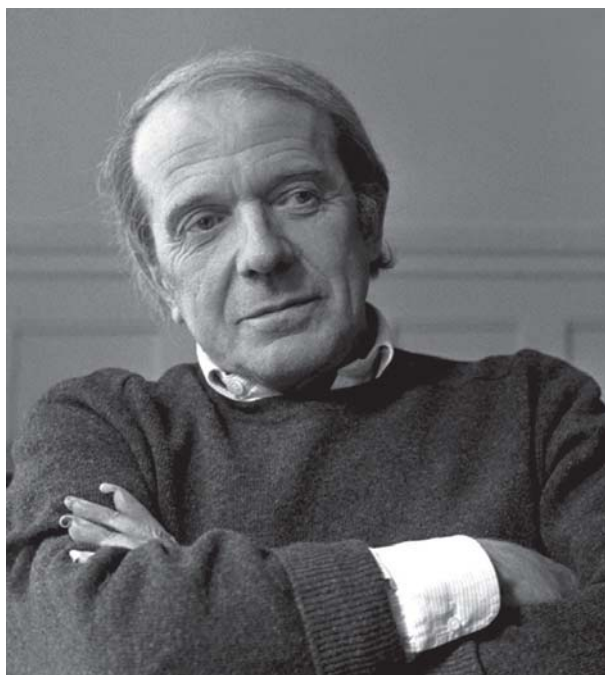
1 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), henceforth cited as *DR*, and Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994).

2 Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972-1990* (New York: Columbia UP, 1990), pp. 144-5, 153, 171. Henceforth cited as *N*.

3 See Yeshayahu Ben-Aharon, "Anthroposophy & Contemporary Philosophy in Dialogue: Observations on the Spiritualization of Thinking," *being human*, Fall 2011, 19-34.

4 *N* 160, 201. This thought was first presented in Deleuze's late masterpiece *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

Paradoxically, abstract thought is body-bound. Deleuze intuits what Steiner revealed in the opening lectures of his "French Course": the physical body can only *reflect* thinking as *Abbild* or deadened image.<sup>5</sup> And today's consumer capitalism regulates desire—and thereby manages the human being in society—by feeding it sensory pleasure. For Steiner and Deleuze both, the first step toward freedom is to reorient and intensify sense-bound thinking and desire. They must be turned away from the body, "deterritorialized" (as Deleuze and Guattari famously put it) and metamorphosed into free, intransitive energies that can be "reterritorialized" or brought to bear on new objects. "One's always writing to bring something to life; to free life from where it's trapped, to trace lines of flight" (N 141). When thinking is mobilized and accelerated in this way, it can achieve escape velocity, and new pathways, new "lines of flight" can open up, raying out towards the macrocosmic periphery where thinking flows freely with infinite speed.



Gilles Deleuze

Deleuze's achievement of a body-free thinking is nowhere more evident than in his last published essay, "Immanence: A Life."<sup>6</sup> Here Deleuze's liberated and sublimated desire achieves a kind of ecstasy: his thinking finds a footing not only outside the body, but entirely outside the lower self. Deleuze is the Schwenk<sup>7</sup>

5 See Steiner, *Philosophy, Cosmology, Religion* (GA 215), lectures 1 and 2 (6 & 7 Sept., 1922).

6 Gilles Deleuze, "Immanence: A Life," in his *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), henceforth cited as IAL.

7 Editor's Note: Theodore Schwenk, author of *Sensitive Chaos*, pioneering water and flow researcher.

of thinking and desire. He leads us into etheric and astral streams of pure becoming that have yet to suffer the division of consciousness into subject and object. Thinking, desire, and their objects unfold as immediate, inseparable presence: "We will say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE, and nothing else" (IAL 27).

Thinking becomes an *encounter* with something substantial. In lecture 3 of the "French Course," Steiner describes this experience of greater "density" in one's thinking as a clear sign of progress in meditative work. *Living thinking becomes a direct experience of the life forces*: "Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of fundamental *encounter* ... its primary characteristic is that it can only be sensed" (DR 139). Deleuze seems to have discovered the same *field of pure activity* that Spinoza termed *natura naturans*, and Steiner described as "living working" (*Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts*), "an absolute immediate consciousness whose very activity no longer refers to a being but is ceaselessly posed in a life" (IAL 27).

Although he does not use the term, there are passages in which Deleuze is clearly describing a macrocosmic experience that is sense-free, body-free, and even "beyond subject and object." Deleuze has found the modern "analogue" of the ancient Greeks' experience of thinking with the etheric body that Steiner calls for in GA 215 (*Philosophy, Cosmology, Religion*). Steiner insists that this new experience of the etheric must be fully conscious, like mathematics, and Deleuze has done just this, reverting over and over to images from higher, "anexact" mathematics such as projective geometry and topology, and describing an "intensive" thinking of pure quality. Although it transcends Greek thought in its clarity, the pure activity Deleuze uncovers arrives with the mythic power of Poseidon's storms:<sup>8</sup>

Something "passes" between the borders, events explode, phenomena flash, like thunder and lightning. Spatio-temporal dynamisms fill the system, expressing simultaneously the resonance of the coupled series and the amplitude of the forced movement which exceeds them... a pure spatio-temporal dynamism... experienced only at the borders of the livable. (DR 118)

Foucault felt the same power: "A bolt of lightning has struck, that will bear Deleuze's name. A new kind of thinking is possible; thinking is possible anew. Here it is, in Deleuze's texts, leaping, dancing before us, among

8 Cf. Steiner, GA 129, *Wonders of the World...*, lecture 3, 20 Aug., 1911.

us" (quoted in *N 88*). Deleuze discovers the young will—the “embryonic” will<sup>9</sup>—that is behind the “old man” of passive thought. “You write with a view to an unborn people that doesn’t yet have a language” (*N 143*).

Deleuze’s thinking reveals itself as an embryology of the higher self. No longer “arborescent,” no longer rooted in the physical, sense-free thinking ramifies endlessly into a rhizome that again recalls Steiner’s description of the newly mobile etheric body in *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*: “...these currents branch out and ramify in the most delicate manner and become, as it were, a kind of web which then encompasses the entire etheric body as though with a network.” Previously, the etheric was an undifferentiated “plane of consistency” (Deleuze) or “universal ocean of life” (Steiner), but now living thinking differentiates this plane locally, calling forth thought-organs (Steiner); a pliable, ever-folding line mapping incarnating archetypes or “singularities” (Deleuze); a membrane that becomes sensitive to the macrocosmic currents passing through it; a new “center” in the region of the heart from which etheric currents run forth (Steiner). “Things” dissolve into processes, unfolding “events.” (Deleuze: “I don’t believe in things” [*N 160*].) Like Steiner, Deleuze describes a realm in which one can watch time metamorphose into space: “This indefinite life does not itself have moments ... it doesn’t just come about or come after but offers the immensity of an empty time where one sees the event yet to come and already happened, in the absolute of an immediate consciousness” (*IAL 29*).

As consciousness expands out from the single, isolated point of the Cartesian *cogito*, it moves inexorably toward its polar opposite: the projective plane at infinity, thinking as a single, organic whole that is simultaneously infinite and indivisible, hence a “plane of consistency.” Expanding consciousness likewise bursts the illusory containers of the body and the soul, revealing the peripheral forces streaming in from the macrocosm to form them. Steiner begins the twelve lectures comprising *A Psychology of Body, Soul & Spirit* (GA 115) with just such a macrocosmic picture of the human body, followed by an intimate phenomenology of the inner life that traces faculties such as sympathy and antipathy, feeling, representation, and memory back to their common source in an intransitive desire that flows from a macrocosmic spiritual will.

Deleuze praises psychoanalysis for having revealed this desire at the base of the soul, and Freud even more so for having discovered that the energies of the libido can be “deterritorialized,” which is to say, transferred,

metamorphosed, and sublimated. But he laments “the other aspect, of personifying these apparatuses (as Super-ego, Ego, and Id), a theatrical *mise-en-scène* that substitutes merely representative tokens for the true productive forces of the unconscious, crippling all desiring production thereby” (*N 16*). Hence, Deleuze and his co-author Félix Guattari seek to liberate and transform this desire, to help it escape from the imagined, neo-Freudian “container” of the body and become a “body without organs.”<sup>10</sup> This notoriously enigmatic “BwO” reveals its real profundity only against the background of Steiner’s macrocosmic account of our higher human nature. One finds even what sounds like intimations of karma in Deleuze’s late writings, e.g.: “A wound is incarnated or actualized in a state of things or a life; but it is itself a pure virtuality on the plane of immanence that leads us into a life. My wound existed before me...” (*IAL 31*).



Rudolf Steiner

### Actualizing Freedom

Ben-Aharon’s book, *The Event in Science, History, Philosophy & Art*, includes an excellent discussion of the potentials for social transformation that are opened up in Deleuze’s enlivened thinking, waiting to be actualized. My own, briefer discussion seeks only to situate this aspect of Deleuze’s work relative to Schiller’s and Steiner’s. Deleuze was personally

9 Steiner, GA 215, lecture 4, 9 Sept., 1922.

10 See esp. Chapter 6 of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

engaged in many causes, including the rights of prisoners, gays, and Palestinians. But his writings are those of the “pure metaphysician” he claimed to be: like Schiller and Steiner, Deleuze says little about specific ethical consequences or social programs. And it must be said in defense of all three that this stance is entirely self-consistent: from the perspective of radical freedom, it is impossible to *prescribe* ethical actions to others, or even to oneself. Instead, the ethical individual expands, refines, and transforms her own cognitive faculties, so as to become a vessel for spiritual intuitions, an artist able to shape and embody entirely new social forms.

The first step toward actualizing freedom is to understand the pathologies of dead thought, of thinking as mere representation of extant structures. Such “repetitions” (as Deleuze calls them) remain impotent: living *thinking* can conceive abstract thought, but there is no way that thought as structure, on its own, can give birth to the spiritual activity of *thinking*. The “tracings” of repetitive thought are necessarily shot through with presupposed interests: as Schiller wrote of the French Revolution, no genuinely radical politics has arisen or ever can arise out of such untransformed thought. “Recognition” – thought as mere representation – “is a sign of the celebration of monstrous nuptials, in which thought ‘rediscovers’ the State, rediscovers ‘the Church’ and rediscovers all the current values that it subtly presented in the pure form of an eternally blessed unspecified eternal object” (DR 136).

Instead, we must build a *rhizome*, an open field of interconnected energies:

The rhizome is altogether different, a *map and not a tracing*... The orchid does not reproduce the tracing of the wasp; it forms a map with the wasp, in a rhizome. What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward experimentation in contact with the real. The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious. It fosters connections between fields, the removal of blockages on bodies without organs, the maximum opening of bodies without organs onto a plane of consistency... The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modifications. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed

as a political action or as a meditation.  
(*A Thousand Plateaus* 12)

Via this thinking that is *anexact* yet rigorous, we leave the “royal road” of extension, learn to live off the Cartesian grid, experiment with non-metric “nomad sciences.” New possibilities open up before us within an intensive field of pure qualities. As in Schiller, as in Steiner, the philosopher becomes the cognitive artist who *creates* concepts, and the cognitive artist inspires in turn the ethical and the social artist. The philosopher sings; the living concept is her “unvoiced song.”<sup>11</sup>

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11 N 163. Deleuze is himself a witness to this powerful experience of real Inspiration: “Take any set of singularities leading from one [to] another, and you have a concept directly related to an event: a lied. A song rises, approaches, or fades away. That’s what it’s like on the plane of immanence: multiplicities fill it, singularities connect with one another, processes or becomings unfold, intensities rise and fall” (N 146-7).