

## ***A Thousand Plateaus and Philosophy: Introduction***

Despite *A Thousand Plateaus* being one of the first texts by Deleuze or Guattari to be translated into English, its reception as a *philosophical* text has largely been secondary to the uses it can be put to in other domains, and to the reception of Deleuze's own sole-authored works, such as *Difference and Repetition*, with their more traditional structures and frequent connections with the history of philosophy. The aim of this volume is to explore the specifically philosophical vision of Deleuze and Guattari's project. Despite the frequent assertions that the kernel of Deleuze and Guattari's thought is to be found in Deleuze's earlier project, even in their final collaboration, Deleuze and Guattari are insistent that the notion of the overcoming of philosophy is merely 'tiresome, idle chatter' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 9). This project brings together fifteen leading scholars on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, each addressing one of the plateaus, focusing on an aspect of that plateau that connects to their own research interests. The result of this process is a volume that both serves as a guide to *A Thousand Plateaus*, but also provides detailed analysis of specific questions, concepts, and relations throughout the different plateaus. In this introduction, I want to set out some of the reasons for taking *A Thousand Plateaus* as a *philosophical* text, beginning with how it seeks to fulfil a promise made in *Difference and Repetition*, before moving on to look at why this project requires a substantial revision of our ideas about the style and structure of a philosophical text.

## **A Thousand Plateaus and Philosophy**

There has been a tendency to dismiss the philosophical import of *A Thousand Plateaus*. Alain Badiou's *Deleuze: The Clamour of Being*, for instance, contains hardly any references to Deleuze's collaborations with Guattari, which are dismissed by Badiou as 'the superficial doxa of an anarcho-desiring Deleuzianism.'<sup>1</sup> The orthodox response to this dismissal has been to focus on Deleuze's early single-authored works as the kernel of his

philosophy, and to see the later work as moving away from traditional philosophical concerns. In 1968, 12 years before the publication of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze claimed in his first major work of independent philosophy, *Difference and Repetition*, that we needed not simply a new approach to philosophy, but also a new mode of philosophical expression. ‘The time is coming when it will hardly be possible to write a book of philosophy as it has been done for so long: “Ah! The old style ...”.’ (Deleuze 1994: xxi) *Difference and Repetition* sets out many of the philosophical themes that are at the heart of *A Thousand Plateaus*: a metaphysics of intensity, a critique of *urdoxae* and the concomitant move to a philosophy of the creation of concepts, and a thoroughgoing critique of representation. This earlier work presents these ideas in a style where the words resonate with each other on the page, at points seemingly departing the philosophical for the poetic.<sup>2</sup> Despite the vibrant rhetorical style running throughout the work, digging a little deeper into *Difference and Repetition* reveals a structure very much like that of a traditional philosophical work, developing a sustained argument from initial claims about how we understand the concept of difference across a number of chapters into a novel account of how we must recognise and think the intensive nature of the world. It is because of this classical structure that *Difference and Repetition* is favoured for philosophical analysis. Despite a rejection of truth as the primary axis of evaluation of claims, it is nonetheless replete with arguments open to evaluation precisely along those lines.

In a later series of interviews, however, Deleuze claims that this early work describes an exercise of thought, but notes that ‘describing it was not yet exercising thought in that way.’ (Deleuze and Parnet 1987: 16) As such, while *Difference and Repetition* recognises the need to move away from traditional approaches to philosophising, it does not itself institute this movement. In an interview with *Libération*, Deleuze makes clear that *A Thousand Plateaus* is very much a philosophy project, and a philosophical system. In this interview, he answers the question, ‘what is philosophy?’ by claiming, ‘Everyone knows that philosophy deals with concepts. A system’s a set of concepts.’ (Deleuze 1995a: 32) As Deleuze and

Guattari note, there are two related aspects to this. There are several ways of conceiving both of a system and of a concept. We can develop a system of essences, which is the traditional model of philosophy. This is a closed system, and defines the traditional model of how philosophy operates. Alternatively, we can develop a notion of a philosophical system that is open. 'It's an open system when the concepts relate to circumstances rather than essences.' (Deleuze 1995a: 32) I will return to this point when I come to the notion of a root-book in *A Thousand Plateaus* itself, but we can note that this distinction runs throughout Deleuze's work, and is at the heart of *Difference and Repetition*, where Deleuze explicitly opposes Aristotle's account of definition, which attempts to rigorously determine the essential nature of a thing ('Socrates is rational'), excluding those features which are purely accidental ('Socrates is sitting'), with his own account of determination through the Idea, which attempts to capture all of the dynamics at play in a system without distinguishing between the essential and inessential. 'No doubt, if one insists, the word 'essence' might be preserved, but only on condition of saying that the essence is precisely the accident, the event, the sense; not simply the contrary of what is ordinarily called the essence but the contrary of the contrary.' (Deleuze 1994: 191) This distinction is also at the heart of *A Thousand Plateaus*. In the rhizomatic structure of *A Thousand Plateaus*, 'the concepts relate to circumstances rather than essences.' Similarly here, we find a move originally made in *Difference and Repetition*, where the question of essence, what is x?' is replaced with the questions, "'how many?'," "how?," "in which cases?". (Deleuze 1994: 182)

If a system is a set of concepts, then what is a concept? The key point to note is that philosophical concepts 'don't, first of all, turn up ready-made.' (Deleuze 1995a: 32) As Deleuze and Guattari note in *What is Philosophy?*, the project of philosophy has traditionally been misconceived as involving 'contemplation, reflection, or communication'. (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 6) That is, philosophy has traditionally presupposed the concepts we use to engage with the world, whereas it is the constitution of these concepts that is the task and object of enquiry of philosophy itself. As they put it, 'The first principle of philosophy is that

Universals explain nothing but must themselves be explained.’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 7) As such, Deleuze and Guattari don’t abandon the role of concepts, but argue for a renewed focus on their genesis, attempting to develop a rigorous account of philosophical concept creation that would avoid replacing ‘critique with sales promotion.’<sup>3</sup> (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 10)

In *Difference and Repetition*, the attempt to think how concepts are constituted revolves around an attempt to develop an account of how thinking operates before it is represented. Thus concepts are seen as constituted by the reflection of thinking on itself, which generates concepts while covering over their origin. Deleuze attempts to develop an account of a ‘thought without image’ (Deleuze 1994: 276) that would be the constitutive force behind our representation. Thus, the project of *Difference and Repetition* owes much to the Bergsonian project of reversing the natural direction of thought that leads from the process of thinking to its fixed forms. *Difference and Repetition* therefore takes up both the notion of an open system, and that of a constituted character of concepts. Nonetheless, we can see why Deleuze later believes that it is only with Guattari that he moves from describing the activity of philosophy to actually doing philosophy. We can note that while Deleuze argues that the question, ‘what is x?’ is an illegitimate question deriving from a philosophy of essence, this form of question is at the heart of *Difference and Repetition*. As he concludes his introduction:

We therefore find ourselves confronted by two questions: what is the concept of difference - one which is not reducible to simple conceptual difference but demands its own Idea, its own singularity at the level of Ideas? On the other hand, what is the essence of repetition – one which is not reducible to difference without concept, and cannot be confused with the apparent character of objects represented by the same concept, but bears witness to singularity as a power of Ideas? (Deleuze 1994: 27)

As Deleuze was later to write of this text, ‘for my part, when I was no longer content with the history of philosophy, my book *Difference and Repetition* still aspired nonetheless toward a sort of classical height and even toward an archaic depth. The theory of intensity which I was drafting was marked by depth, false or true; intensity was presented as stemming from the depths.’ (Deleuze 2006: 65) This reliance on traditional categories comes through in Deleuze’s characterisation of the project as attempting to think ‘difference-in-itself,’ which, mirroring Kant’s transcendental idealism, is itself characterised as ‘the closest noumenon.’

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, this methodological reliance on traditional categories of philosophy such as essence is left behind. Deleuze writes of his first collaboration with Guattari that ‘no longer has height or depth, nor surface. In this book everything happens, is done, the intensities, the events, upon a sort of spherical body or scroll painting: The Organless Body’ (Deleuze 2006: 66) and the same claim could be made of *A Thousand Plateaus* itself. The central question of *A Thousand Plateaus* is not, ‘what is?’, but ‘how does one make?’. This move to a loose pragmatism involves a different conception of what philosophy entails. Rather than the attempt to distinguish true and false depths – the project of distinguishing lineages of images that still holds to Plato’s model of philosophy just as a photographic negative maintains the detail of the image it inverts – Deleuze and Guattari joyously take up one of the central concepts of *Difference and Repetition*: the image of thought. In *Difference and Repetition*, the image of thought is the surface effect of the subrepresentational nature of thinking – a paralogism created by the reflection of thinking on itself that is at the heart of philosophy’s inability to think depth appropriately. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, by contrast, the philosophical project does not involve the search for a moment prior to an image of thought, but the construction of a new image of thought – the ‘vegetal image of thought.’ (Deleuze 1994: xvii) As such, it eschews the effort to seek the essence of the world in favour of a more pragmatic concern of developing a rigorous but different systematic way of relating elements together. Deleuze and Guattari met in 1969, when

Deleuze was convalescing after the removal of a lung and Guattari was searching for a creative outlet that would allow him to give structure to his militant left-wing activities, work on psychoanalysis at the La Borde clinic and ideas around machines, political and social structures, capitalism and schizophrenia (Dosse 2010: 3). These latter themes bring new directions and different concepts to the philosophy developed in *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense*. With Guattari, philosophy becomes machinic and political, a multiple practice, and an intervention on psychoanalysis and modern psychoses.

Thinkers such as Badiou, therefore, who argue that the philosophical content of Deleuze's thought is contained purely within the early works show a fundamental misunderstanding of the project of Deleuze and Guattari. They invert the natural order of Deleuze and Guattari's own account of their work. *Difference and Repetition* sets out the criteria which a new style of philosophy must adopt, but it is *A Thousand Plateaus* which takes seriously the need to move away from a philosophy of essence, and hence a thinking in terms of depth, a form of thought itself criticised in *The Logic of Sense*. It is in his collaborations with Felix Guattari that Deleuze claims that the actual practice of the new philosophy heralded in *Difference and Repetition* became possible. *A Thousand Plateaus*, for Deleuze, did not represent simply a new philosophical position, but rather a whole new way of doing philosophy.

### **The Root-Book**

So if *A Thousand Plateaus* takes up Deleuze's critique of classical philosophy, how does this critique manifest itself in the structure of *A Thousand Plateaus* itself? At the heart of *A Thousand Plateaus* is the vegetal image of thought. It is this that leads Deleuze's major collaboration with Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, to manifest a new philosophical style. We can begin to see how it achieves this by turning to the contents page of the book itself. Here, rather a set of chapters, we find a list of fifteen plateaus, each on idiosyncratic topics such as

how one makes a body without organs, war machines, and the possibility of a geology of morals. Superficially, these appear to be chapters in all but name, but as Deleuze and Guattari note, 'it's like a set of split rings. You can fit anyone of them into any other. Each ring, or each plateau, ought to have its own climate, its own tone or timbre.' (Deleuze 1995a: 25) We can understand the move Deleuze and Guattari are making by comparing it to their characterisation of the alternative – the root book:

A first type of book is the root-book. The tree is already the image of the world, or the root the image of the world-tree. This is the classical book, as noble, signifying, and subjective organic interiority (the strata of the book). The book imitates the world, as art imitates nature: by procedures specific to it that accomplish what nature cannot or can no longer do. (ATP 5)

We can work through some implications of this account now. First, this definition of a philosophical work as dates back to Plato, who makes a similar claim that a work must have an organic structure:

Every discourse (logos) must be put together like a living creature, with a body of its own; it must be neither without head nor without legs; and it must have a middle and extremities that are fitting both to one another and to the whole work.<sup>4</sup>

At the heart of the concept of the organism is that it is teleological – it functions for some purpose. It is this purpose that gives meaning to the parts of the organism by allowing them to be defined by their relations to the whole. Second the nature of the whole is defined by the reciprocal relations of the parts. As Kant writes in the *Critique of Judgement*, parts. Thus, Kant writes that “just as each part exists only *as a result* of all the rest, so we think of each part as existing *for the sake* of the others and of the whole, i.e. as an instrument (organ).”

(Kant 1987: §373) As Kant makes clear, the reason for the introduction of the categories of the organic is that an understanding of the world purely in terms of physics is unable to explain why certain objects have an inside and an outside rather than simply being heaps of matter. Seeing the organism as unified according to a purpose gives us a way of making a sharp distinction between the inside and the outside, and understanding a philosophical text on the model of an organism similarly allows us to see it as closed and complete. Once we do so, we develop the other characteristics of the root-book. As the book is complete in itself, its reference to the world is as a model for what it discusses. The root-book introduces an ontological rift between the world and our representation of it. Further, this structure of imitation operates in a manner that differs from what it is discussing. The book accomplishes ‘what nature cannot or can no longer do.’ A traditional text does not simply imitate nature as it is, but rather determines those features of it that are essential.

The classic model of an organic system would be Hegel’s philosophy, which develops a sophisticated web of concepts where the meaning of each is determined by the meaning of all of the others, as in a form of life, and while the system extends to infinity, it remains closed or totalised. Here, the determination of concepts takes place immanently, purely in terms of the unfolding of internal principles. We can see a precursor to this in the immanent development of Descartes’ metaphysics from the single Archimedean point of the *cogito*. Here we have here a sequence of linear descent, which Deleuze and Guattari align with an arborescent image of thought.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Rhizome**

So here we can return to the notion of a plateau. In a classical philosophical text, the chapters follow one another in a sequence, with each building on the results of the previous chapter. The structure is much like Descartes’ hierarchy of the sciences, where we progressively move from a set of presuppositions to a conclusion through a series of

arguments. The plateaus of *A Thousand Plateaus* are not determined by an overarching unity that closes the text in on itself. While Deleuze and Guattari still take up the model of life, rather than the closed model of the organism, they favour an open model that encompasses symbiotic relationships between organisms, and the transversal communication of DNA between species.<sup>6</sup> As such, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari try to put into practice the implications of their critique of the philosophical question, ‘what is it?’ In moving to the questions, “Which one?” “Where?” “When?” “How?” “How many?” “In which case?” and “Who?”, they call for a new form of writing. For this reason, *A Thousand Plateaus* is rhizomatic rather than taking the tree as its model. It presents itself as a series of interconnected moments, where one can begin anywhere, and read the plateaus in any order. As such, rather than seeing plateaus as layers that one must move through, they are better seen as the dimensions of a space, where one can move from one plateau to another simply by a reorientation and change in direction, and each intersects all of the others. Deleuze and Guattari describe it as follows:

The rhizome is altogether different, a map and not a tracing. Make a map, 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 an 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. It is itself a part of the rhizome. The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. 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. Perhaps one of the most

important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways; in this sense, the burrow is an animal rhizome, and sometimes maintains a clear distinction between the line of flight as passageway and storage or living strata (cf. the muskrat). A map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back "to the same." (ATP 12)

Whether this project is successful (and Deleuze will later suggest that *A Thousand Plateaus* may indeed be a productive failure), (Deleuze and Parnet 1987: 17) it at the least opens up new possibilities for doing philosophy, and shows that any re-evaluation of the philosophical enterprise cannot simply be restricted to a change in argument, but calls also for a reappraisal of the whole style of philosophical enquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> Badiou 2000. Quotation taken from translator's introduction, xii.

<sup>2</sup> This more creative approach to the practice of philosophy, as a forerunner of the innovations of *A Thousand Plateaus*, can be found in the serial structure, textual openness, conceptual ambiguity and multiple voices of *The Logic of Sense*, a text contemporary to *Difference and Repetition*. See Williams 2008: ch. 1.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of Deleuze and Guattari on the creation of concepts, see Jeff Bell, *Deleuze and Guattari's What is Philosophy?*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016, ch. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Plato 1997a: 264c. C.f. Jacques Derrida's essay, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in Derrida 1982 in for a discussion of organic metaphors in Plato. Derrida is close to Deleuze and Guattari in this essay, both in his analysis of the impossibility of the organicist conception of the text actually providing closure, and in his own recognition that the implications of this are a new style of philosophising.

<sup>5</sup> See Miguel Beistegui's contribution to this volume for the relationship between Descartes and arborescence.

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<sup>6</sup> As Simon O’Sullivan notes in his contribution to this collection, the very openness of Deleuze and Guattari’s system means that any attempt to delimit a purely philosophical content to the project risks construing it as a closed system. Nonetheless, we follow Deleuze and Guattari here, when they note in the analysis of smooth and striated space that ‘de facto mixes do not preclude a de jure, or abstract, distinction.’ (ATP 475) In this volume, we recognise that any purely philosophical content must be seen as growing rhizomatically with the “non-philosophical”.