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## The role of the philosopher in relation to life - some notes on creativity and stupidity

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*This is the text of a talk I gave at “Kant’s Cave”, an event organised by the London based ‘Philosophy for All’ group (<http://pfalondon.org/kant.html>), on March 7th 2013. Some minor corrections and changes have been made from the text presented.*

*The paper presents a ‘creative’ concept of philosophy that is central to the work of both Nietzsche and Deleuze and one of the problems that such creativity encounters, the problem of stupidity. One note of caution - the text is primarily a ‘reading’ intended for a philosophically aware but generalised audience and aimed to prompt discussion about the role of the individual in relation to the social, so it skims over some key epistemological problems, such as the concept of ‘experience’ and it does not directly explore ontological issues surrounding the concept of ‘life’.*

**MJL, 12/05/2015**

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In Chapter 3 of the book Nietzsche and philosophy, entitled *Critique* and focussed on the alternative to Kantian thought that can be found in Nietzsche, Deleuze directly addresses the question of 'thought and life', of the relationship between the activity of thought as a specific particular practice and the wider context of living in general, life in general. He is addressing a seeming contradiction

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that can be found in Nietzsche between three terms and their relations. The seeming contradiction is of the following form: Nietzsche condemns Socrates for putting Life under the sway of Knowledge and yet at the same time condemns Socrates for putting Thought under the sway of Life. On the one hand we seem to find Nietzsche saying Life should be superior, not Knowledge, whilst on the other hand we seem to find Nietzsche saying that Thought should be superior, not Life. The seeming contradiction comes in the sense we might have that Knowledge and Thought are indistinguishable, that Knowledge is, as it were, simply the product of successful Thought. Why then simultaneously condemn Knowledge in the name of Life and Life in the name of Thought? To explore this question I want to begin by just trying to clarify the inter-relationships amongst the three terms, Life, Knowledge and Thought.

On the one hand we have Knowledge dominant over Life. Knowledge in this situation is taken to guide and constrain life. The idea here is something along the following lines – if we know what the good life is then we lead the good life, we are constrained by the knowledge to act in a particular way. Well plainly this doesn't seem to pan out in reality, people don't act under a constraint of rational knowledge, a problem we encounter in the Socratic period under the name of *akrasia* (weakness of the will) and that returns in modernity, via Spinoza, as a political and psychic problem (why do people desire their own repression). 'Weakness of the will' is a curious phrase, of course, because it must refer to a weakness of the *will to live rationally* not of the will in general. In fact the problem of *akrasia* is encountered in various other philosophers as the *strength of the will*, the difficulty of bridling the instinct, the will to pleasure, the hedonistic impulse or any number of other terms for this irrational aspect of ourselves, perhaps most vividly as the Black horse of the Charioteer myth in Plato's Phaedrus.

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Pursuing the idea that the first relation that Deleuze identifies in Nietzsche is one in which Knowledge is dominant over Life (K over L) we find that the problem is taken to be one in which K *determines* L but in doing so converts a *particular concept of Life* into the *universal concept of Life*. Life, as a general and vague concept, is turned into something specific, a *rational Life*. The assumption that life is capable of being rational is smuggled in, an assumption that produces the problem of *akrasia* when we find difficulties in getting actual Life to obey the laws of reason we think it somehow ought to obey. If this assumption is dropped, there is no longer a problem of *akrasia*, there is instead the encounter with a fact, an experience, of Life as resistant to rational ordering.

If the first problem arises in making assumptions about what Life is, the second problem arises when Life is made dominant over Thought. It is not as though we begin again with a fresh concept of Life, instead the assumption that Life is capable of being rationally ordered by Knowledge is an assumption that then effects what it is that Thought is meant to do. Thought is now subjected to the ends or purposes of a specific type of Life, *rationally ordered Life*. Thought is meant to serve Life but in fact is being made to serve this *particular type of Life*.

Returning to the double condemnation then, condemning Knowledge in the name of Life and Life in the name of Thought, it is possible to see that in the first case Knowledge is condemned for *restricting* our concept of Life, for smuggling in an assumption, whilst in the second case the *restricted concept of Life* is condemned for further restricting Thought. Throughout this situation the problem lies in the issue of restriction. When we ask about the role of the philosopher in

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relation to life we tend towards a restriction of the central concept of life itself. If we slip into the unargued assumption that life is capable of being - or somehow ought to be - rationally organised then we we likely continue on this road to restrict what we think of thought itself, what we consider the *task of thinking*.

The apparent difficulty is not difficult to resolve then, it is not even a difficulty of any real merit, more a device to enable a claim to be made, a claim about the nature of thinking. It is important to recall that for Deleuze there is a strong antagonism within his work to any sense of simple naive enlightenment arising from rational thinking. It is this antagonism that lies behind his claim that "everything begins with misosophy" rather than philosophy (DR:176). It is also this antagonism, however. that commentators of limited depth often pick up on when they accuse Deleuze of a naive anti-rationalist, anti-enlightenment attitude. There is *a rational problem of reason* that motivates Deleuze. It is not an awkward, teenage rebellion against science, reason and his intellectual betters that underlies his work but rather a deeply elitist sense of the difficulty of thinking and a revulsion against stupidity, particularly the stupidity that has clothed itself in the trappings of the intellect. It is the intensely personal revolt against stupidity that fundamentally motivates Deleuze, a revolt that is first expressed precisely by the very enlightenment he would supposedly condemn. Deleuze is an Enlightenment thinker in that he shares a desire to combat stupidity – his difficulty with the Enlightenment lies not in its goals but in its naivete.

So what is the claim about thinking that is important and that underlies the seeming contradiction? *Thinking must be a creative not a regulative activity*. This is, however, the core of Deleuze's problem. The claim, that thinking must be a creative not a regulative activity, threatens to deny any

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real power to thought. The normative nature of the claim (the 'must be') brings with it enormous complications not least for any naturalistic-leaning philosopher<sup>1</sup> and the denial of the regulative role leaves post-Kantian philosophers adrift.<sup>2</sup> It seems to turn thought into a kind of play, a kind of art – perhaps we should say 'arty' – activity rather than the liberating source of human progress. It might even be claimed that the desire to make thought creative rather than regulative is simply another form of the stupidity Deleuze supposedly resists. Deleuze is aware of this problem, however, when he condemns the idea of advertising agencies somehow pretending that they are 'creating concepts'. Whilst thought must be, for Deleuze, creative, this does not mean he thinks anything goes. Deleuze appears to take considerable inspiration from Nietzsche and, like Nietzsche, is an elitist. Thought and thinking need to be creative but that does not mean that thinking is child's play – it must instead be a heroic activity.

The creativity that Deleuze is referring to is intended as a far more rigorous task expressed in another claim, which is that *thought must 'go to the limit'*. The apparent origins of Deleuze's concept of the task of thinking, or the role of the philosopher in relation to life can be found in this 3rd Chapter of his 'Nietzsche' book where we find a number of ideas that are going to play a central

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<sup>1</sup> Taking naturalistic philosophy to be a description of language - which even if it describes language as a system of inferences, or oughts, is still a description of *what is* not *what ought to be* – it contains no notion, nor can it, of how thought ought to be, of how we 'ought to ought' only of how we actually 'correctly ought'.

<sup>2</sup> The post-Kantian philosopher might plead something along the following lines - “If the role of thought is not judgement then what does it consist in? If it is judgement then this involves the application of concepts of the understanding to the manifold of sensibility.” The double-bind nature of this question means that, if refused, the questioner is incapable of binding their interlocutor into a dialogue. From their perspective they exclude but from the other side they become adrift.

role in his later philosophy. In particular we find this 'heroic' conception of thought as well as the first mention of stupidity as an issue of central importance for philosophy. In Section 13 of that Chapter, where the discussion of Knowledge, Life and Thought and their relations occurs, Deleuze rests heavily on Nietzsche's book 'Philosophy in the tragic age of the Greeks'. It is from this early text of Nietzsche that Deleuze picks up a heroic concept of thought. We see this in particular in a long quotation from Nietzsche that Deleuze uses about the nature of thinkers. Here Nietzsche claims that thinkers have specific types of lives, 'lives with prodigious difficulties'. "There is as much invention, reflection, boldness, despair and hope here as in the voyages of great navigators; and to tell the truth, these are also voyages of exploration in the most distant and perilous domains of life" (NP:101). This dangerous exploration, all at once both an exploration only because it is willing to allow danger and dangerous in its willingness to do so, reveals the mode of thinking about thought that conceives it as a heroic activity. It is also what underpins the claim by Deleuze that thought must *go to the limit* because we might immediately ask, the limit of what? The answer would be, *to the limit of the capacity of thought* but how would we begin to understand what that was? It is here that Nietzsche's text can help because for Nietzsche the Greek philosophers have *already done this*.

Nietzsche's book attempts to tell the story of early Greek thought, the pre-Socratics. In it we see the pre-occupations of Nietzschean thought with hierarchy, health and physiology but above all with culture. He claims that it was only with the Greeks, in the time of the pre-Socratics, that the philosopher was at home and precisely because of a relationship between Thought, Knowledge and Life that existed then and was subsequently distorted by Socrates, Plato and the academy. Nietzsche lays out his basic outlook when he claims that "whoever concerns himself with the

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Greeks should be ever mindful that an unrestrained thirst for knowledge for its own sake barbarizes men just as much as a hatred of knowledge." (PTG 30-31) He goes on to argue that the Greeks possessed an 'insatiable thirst for knowledge' but they "*controlled it by their ideal need for and consideration of all the values of life*. Whatever they learned, they wanted to live through, immediately." (ibid). Their achievement was immense in that they invented "the archetypes of philosophic thought" (ibid). The basic shapes of philosophical thinking are given to us by the pre-Socratics.

Here the connection to the relations of Thought, Life and Knowledge appear. Unlike the restricted concept of Life that appears with Socrates, the pre-Socratics lived, for Nietzsche, in a time of Greek culture when Life was valued *in its plurality*, in 'all its values'. The range of values will become organised by Nietzsche into the major dichotomy of the Dionysian and Apollonian which itself will mutate into the *active and passive forces of life*. It is this later division of the *forces of life* into active and passive that Deleuze picks up and uses as one of the central tenets of his own work. In the pre-Socratics, however, these major dynamics are not dominant yet and philosophy begins in an intensely personal relationship to the lives of people, the philosophers, with thinking directing Life but before the restriction of the need for this Life to be rationally ordered. Instead the pre-Socratics *lived their thinking* as a kind of experimental exploration, one in which Thought is not 'dominant' over Life, has no set goals for what Life should be but rather *is itself a way of living*, one no longer simply governed by non-reflective behaviour but now opened up by the wealth of possibilities that arise from the power of thinking, the power of *nous*. A new perceptual structure – 'the mind's eye' – opens onto the world and surveys the landscape freely and without restriction.

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To talk of thought 'going to the limit', moving beyond restrictions, presents us with the core of the attitude to the task of thinking as heroic activity that is found in Nietzsche and taken up by Deleuze. The second moment of importance with regard to the conception of thinking that can be found in Deleuze's text concerns the notion of 'stupidity', a problem that arises precisely as intimate companion of the hero. A clear expression of the heroic task and of the problems within it comes in two citations Deleuze draws from the work of Lev Shestov. Shestov claims that "all truths derive from the *parere* [submission] – even metaphysical ones. And nevertheless, the only source of metaphysical truth is the *jubere* [command]" (NP 91) and he goes on to offer his own characterisation of the Greeks. "The Greeks felt that submission, the obedient acceptance of all that presents itself, hides true being from man. In order to reach true reality one must consider oneself as the master of the world, one must learn to command and create ... Here, *where sufficient reason is lacking* ... they saw the beginning of metaphysical truth." (NP 91-91). Here the citation from Shestov finishes and Deleuze draws the lesson that the philosopher must not become a legislator, a judge in a court of reason, but a creator and more specifically, a *creator of values*. (NP 92)<sup>3</sup>. Now it is worth noting that the Shestov quote that Deleuze draws on continues as follows - "Kant turned away from metaphysics only because he had caught in it a glimpse of the terrible jubere, that jubere which he translated (and rightly) by a term which everyone holds in horror - 'the arbitrary'." (AF: 397)

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<sup>3</sup> The source for this citation from Shestov is given as "Shestov, "La second dimension de la Pensee", NRF, Sept.1932. In the published work [Athens and Jerusalem](#), trans. Bernard Martin, Ohio University Press, 1966, this text constitutes the fourth part of the book. There we find, in section 9 of the text entitled 'The source of metaphysical truths', the first part of the passage Deleuze quotes, on jubere and parere, whilst the second part of the citation concerning sufficient reason comes from section 16, entitled 'The maximum of metaphysics'.



If the task of the philosopher in relation to life is the heroic one of creation, the intimate companion possibility is stupidity. The lack of sufficient reason that must, by definition, lie in the essence of the free creator because as source they become a first cause of their actions and thoughts beyond reason, brings with it the inability to be certain that the creation is not simply arbitrary nonsense. The philosophers' wisdom may be only apparent and concealing deep stupidity. There is no obvious escape route here, no possible criteria by which we might guarantee the making of sense rather than nonsense, but that does not mean the arbitrary should be feared blindly and denied existence. The solution is not to fear stupidity but to become familiar with it. Specifically, philosophy should be less concerned with error and more concerned with stupidity.

There is a vacillation here, one that can be identified when we ask of Deleuze and Nietzsche whether they are describing or prescribing the task of thinking. If their account is a description and the heroic task of thinking is not a call to behave in a particular way but rather a call to recognise the way in which *honest* philosophers actually behave, then the philosopher and thinker in general has no option but to recognise the danger of stupidity nascent in the inherent arbitrariness of their activity in so far as it is a free activity. Nietzsche's description of philosophy in the pre-Socratic period, presented as a story in which 3 anecdotes from a life or a thought are enough to characterise its personality<sup>4</sup>, makes precisely the claim that it is only in this 'tragic age of the Greeks' that philosophers are in an honest relation to their society. The culture of the Greeks, Nietzsche argues, is in harmony with the activity of freedom found in the creative experimentation of the philosopher. "Only a culture such as the Greeks possesses can answer our question as to the task of the philosopher and can demonstrate why and how the philosopher is *not* a chance random wanderer,

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<sup>4</sup> PTG 25, 'A later preface'

exiled to this place or that. There is a steely necessity which binds a philosopher to a genuine culture. But what if such a culture does not exist? Then the philosopher is a comet, incalculable and therefore terror-inspiring" (PTG 33-34). In a culture that fails to grasp the inherent problem of free thinking, its lack of sufficient reason, its need to command without right, the philosopher who acts as a thinker becomes a comet, something stellar, yet becomes dishonest in that very elevation. Their elevation forgets the problem of stupidity that accompanies all thinking.

Deleuze argues that modern thought is dominated by a dogmatic image, something he calls the 'Image of thought', a concept first presented in his book on Nietzsche as a small subsection of the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter on critique and which subsequently goes on to become the whole 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of his major work Difference and repetition. This image of thought has a number of characteristics but central to it is the emphasis on error, on thought as a practice of correcting error in the pursuit of knowledge. For Deleuze, however, it is stupidity, not error, that is the failure of thinking. He illustrates this by pointing to the trivial nature of errors that philosophers often use. Mature thinking, he argues, is not opposed by error but by something that is profound in its own way, stupidities. Moreover "stupidity is a structure of thought as such" (NP 105)<sup>5</sup>. In the course of philosophy after the Greeks the opponent of philosophy is taken to be error and stupidity is reduced to this empirical reality. Instead, Deleuze claims, stupidity is part of the transcendental structure of thinking, it is part of the conditions of possibility of thinking. Stupidity, we might say, comes with the territory and is no less terrifying for all that.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf DR 149-153

Stupidity is the translation of the French 'betise', which has a common root in 'bete' or beast<sup>6</sup>. The connotation in French is one perhaps not so close in English, between beastliness and stupidity. Deleuze notes the way in which caricatures often use animal heads to replace the caricatured figure, indicating some stupidity and cruelty on the part of the caricatured figure. Deleuze declares, however, that "stupidity (betise) is not animality" and that "the animal is protected by specific forms which prevent it from being stupid (bete)" (DR 150). There is here, as Derrida notes in his essay on Deleuze and stupidity, a modesty arising from recognising the specifically non-animal nature of stupidity, the intimacy of stupidity and thought. This is encapsulated in the perhaps infamous lines from Difference and Repetition where Deleuze asks what he calls a 'properly transcendental question' which is "how is stupidity (not error) possible?" (DR:189) In this question there is, Derrida suggests, a reconfiguring of the transcendental. The question of the possibility of stupidity and *not error* removes the transcendental question from the realm of epistemology, Deleuze "pulls his question out from this epistemological regime", the "territory of knowledge, judgement on truth and error" (DDP: 45). Stupidity – not error – is crucial to Deleuze because it is identified as the condition of thinking. Stupidity is possible because we think, not because we make mistakes in our thinking (DR: 188 – 190). "Stupidity (not error) constitutes the greatest weakness of thought, but also the source of the greatest power in that which forces it to think" (DR:345).

Derrida goes on to question Deleuze about this distinction between the animal that is incapable of stupidity and the thinking being that is capable of thinking only because they are simultaneously capable of stupidity. For Deleuze stupidity arises because of the very process of individuation of

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<sup>6</sup> When this talk was given at the PFA an audience member pointed out that it is possible for 'betise' to translate 'mischievous'.

the thinker. The 'I' or 'self' that thinks must arise as a free, undetermined moment and it is precisely this lack of determination that enables it to think freely and which simultaneously draws in the intimate possibility of stupidity. Only a free entity, we might say, can be stupid and it is for this reason that the animal is never stupid. Derrida poses the distinction he sees in Deleuze as one between the free thinking entity, capable of sovereignty and the lack of sovereignty in the animal, a distinction "between responsible response and irresponsible reaction" (DDP: 58). He goes on to suggest that in this distinction Deleuze falls squarely within a traditional philosophical image of the distinction between human and animal that goes from Descartes to modern times (ibid). In contrast Derrida suggests that the tension between thinking and stupidity, its intimate companion and opponent, is not a distinction in kind between types of entity (human versus animal) but rather between different types of force. There are dynamics and drives that produce all "finite, living being, human or nonhuman" and which might be found in the idea of the 'survival of the fittest' (DDR: 59). The problem of stupidity, he suggests, is not something specific to *thinking* but is far more intimately related to *sovereignty*. The one who is free denounces the other as slave, the one who thinks denounces the other as stupid and yet simultaneously in this denunciation they risk the stupidity and slavery they denounce. This occurs because of the *effect* of the denunciation.

Derrida does not go on to expand on this thought in the particular essay on Deleuze and stupidity but what might be meant by this idea of the effect of the denunciation? In posing oneself as free, sovereign, thinking, something occurs, the constitution of a relation of some sort. For Deleuze and Nietzsche what occurs is the expansion of possibilities, the opening up of the power of thought. They describe, they think, this necessary process in which an elitism is inherent to thinking because it frees itself from baseness, from stupidity. It is simply the way freedom is, they seem to want to

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argue, that it is only free when it is active, expansive, creative, Dionysian. In this situation the effect of enslavement is irrelevant. Indeed this seems to be precisely Nietzsche's point in identifying the Greek culture as one in which the philosopher is at home because they are not comets, not stellar, not possessed of some 'power over' others, entailing enslavement, but simply possessed of a 'power to', an increasing capacity to expand life. Nietzsche might be said to acknowledge the problem of thinking in a culture that is uncomfortable with indetermination and uncertainty but he also dismisses it as a problem of health. The philosopher has a relation to life, for Nietzsche and Deleuze, a relation of expansion, power and experiment - but in that relation to life we might wonder whether they sacrifice a relation to the human, the social and the community?

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