

Working with Deleuze and Laruelle : The Non-Philosophical Use of Philosophical Concepts

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I

I am a professional philosopher. My formal educational background is in philosophy, and for the most part I have taught philosophy to Humanities students. But for the last decade I have also been involved with teaching philosophy to students of arts practice, in various settings. When I first began to do this one of my key aims was to avoid being punched by any of my art students. This was a concern to me because a mentor of mine told me that for several semesters she had taught philosophy at an art college, and that one reason she gave it up is that she had felt like some of her students had wanted to punch her. From what she told me, I think the problem was that these students didn't want some philosopher coming along telling them what they, as artists, should be doing.

No problem, I thought, it's just a matter of framing what I'm doing so that this *hierarchical* relationship between philosophy teacher and art student isn't set up in the first place. And fortunately, the philosophers I was most interested in (and continue to be interested in) – such as Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze – lent themselves very well to such a nonhierarchical relationship between philosophy and art. While (fortunately) I've never encountered the problem of an art student wanting to punch me, I've continued to be intrigued by the questions surrounding the relationship of philosophy and art, and in particular – given my pedagogical concern – how this relationship can best be understood so that it has a beneficial *practical* effect? That is, so that teaching art students philosophy doesn't shut them down in resentment and confusion, but inspires and enables their creativity? This talk is an attempt to address such questions.

Let me begin with an anecdote. A philosopher-friend had moved to town, and one of her housemates was an artist who, she reported to me, had a keen interest in Deleuze. She had seen his well-thumbed collection of Deleuze books, and had frequently heard him speak enthusiastically of the French philosopher. I got to meet this housemate-artist at a pub one night, and over several pints of beer we discussed Deleuze. He told me that the key idea in Deleuze which had made a great impact on his artistic work was 'immanence.' Or so I at first thought. It was loud in the pub and we were a bit drunk, so it took me a while to realise that what he understood from Deleuze's works, which had been such an inspiration for his artistic activity, was not 'immanence,' the term opposed to transcendence, but imminence, when something is about to happen. He had misunderstood Deleuze, not just on a philosophical level, but on the level of language. My first reaction was to feel embarrassed for him. I wondered if I should explain his error, but it felt too much, after an hour and a half of hearing him talk about it. But then, I reflected on something Deleuze himself said, recorded in *Negotiations*, about how to read:

There are, you see, two ways to read a book: you either see it as a box with something inside and start looking for what it signifies, and then if you're even more perverse or depraved you set off after signifiers. And you treat the next book like a box contained in the first, or containing it. And you annotate and interpret and question, and write a book about the book, and so on and on. Or there's the other way: you see the book as a little non-signifying machine, and the only question is "Does it work, and how does it work?" How does it work for you? If it doesn't work, if nothing comes through, you try another book. This second way of reading's intensive: something comes through or it doesn't. It's like plugging into an electric circuit. . . . This intensive way of reading, in contact with what's outside the book, as a flow meeting other flows, one machine among others, as a series of experiments for each reader in the midst of events that have nothing to do with books, as tearing the book into pieces, getting it to interact with other things, absolutely anything . . . is reading with love. (Deleuze 1995, 8-9)

If I felt the need to 'correct' my new friend's reading, then I was the perverse one, according to Deleuze's own criteria and how he wished his work to be read. It is better then for the artist to conduct the energy from the book which is facilitated by the connection which was this particular misunderstanding, than for me to short-circuit the connection and stop the flow. If his working with Deleuze's books, misunderstandings included, aided his creative processes, then this was a line of flight to be affirmed.

I believe that Deleuze's work, and especially the work with Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, is one of the most useful bodies of philosophy for the practical concerns outlined above. Let me just note a few points on which I find this work useful. Several times I have taught a seminar on *A Thousand Plateaus* titled or subtitled 'Concepts for Artists.' (Sometimes with various words like 'war machine,' 'assemblage,' 'bodies without organs,' and so on included to make it sound a bit sexier.) For this is exactly what I think we can find here: concepts that can be useful for artists in the production of art. The reasons why are laid out in the best-known Plateau, on the rhizome. The first three 'principles of rhizomatic thought' can be read as principles of creativity; they are about creativity as the forging of new, imaginative connections where they didn't exist or we couldn't see them before.

Principles 1 and 2 are the principles of *connection* and *heterogeneity*. The first states that any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and the second, that things of different qualities and types can be connected. Principle 3 is that of *multiplicity*. A rhizome is a multiplicity, that is, a complex structure which does not reference a prior unity; a patchwork or ensemble of things which remains open to being connected with further things, and changed by such connections. A related term is arguably the key one in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the *assemblage*, which is defined as '[an] increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections.' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 8) Deleuze and Guattari's work provides concepts useful for artists because they invite their philosophical works to be used as toolkits, and they invite the extraction of their concepts and their connection with other, extra-conceptual, extra-linguistic things and states of affairs in order to create heterogenous assemblages. Such assemblages might be works of art, made with Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical concepts. Such an approach breaks down the problematic hierarchical relationship between the philosophical interpretation of the meaning of art, and the artist as a confused philosopher who can only dimly express ideas by 'making things.'

Artists should not be tempted by the current tendency in much Deleuze studies to reconstitute Deleuze as a 'serious' philosopher with a rigorous, if open, system. Instead, following Deleuze's own invitation, artists should view Deleuze's texts as toolkits, replete with an extraordinarily rich variety of concepts able to be extracted and connected with extra-textual things in order to create works of art. The use to which Deleuze's concepts are put by artists should not be judged successful or unsuccessful according to philosophical criteria: for example, whether or not the artist 'understands' the concept, can give a correct definition, reconstitute it in a system, or repeat it in a way which reassures the philosopher of its continued identity as the concept which they (as a serious Deleuze scholar) claims the authority to adjudicate. Instead, following Deleuze's invitation, the best thing artists can do with his concepts would be to pervert, transform, and render them unrecognisable to the philosopher in using them to artistic ends. The success of such uses should then be judged by artistic criteria alone: even if the concept seems to the philosopher to have been *utterly misunderstood* by the artist, has it contributed to making good art?

This is the approach I have taken in working with Deleuze with art students, inviting them to appropriate Deleuzian concepts as they see fit. The results are often more rewarding than working with Humanities students. While the latter frequently give back to you an inferior version of what you gave them (philosophy, less well understood), the former can surprise, delight, and challenge, giving back to you what you gave them transformed and connected with heterogeneous things (making a new assemblage). One of my students, for example, once advised me that the best way to make an Abstract Machine is with beetroot juice and corn flour. Yet at the same time, there does seem to be something wrong with such definitions if they are really taken to be *understandings* of Deleuze's philosophy. So how should we understand art and philosophy in a way which gives them the freedom of association which seems so desirable, yet respects their own domains of legitimacy? Deleuze and Guattari seem to have answered this question themselves in the last book they wrote together, *What is Philosophy?*

II

In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari lay out what they see as the relationships between philosophy, art, and science. Each are forms of thinking, which plunge into chaos and bring something back. The difference between philosophy and art is here specified clearly: philosophy creates *concepts*, whereas art creates *sensations*. Sensations are percepts and affects, that is, perceptions and feelings considered independently of a perceiving and feeling subject, and raised to ontological status. Works of art are compounds of percepts and affects, beings of sensation, which have a 'monumental' status: inscribed in some material, they 'stand up on their own,' existing independently of the artist or art appreciator. The function of the artist is to bring new varieties of sensations into the world.

There are meeting points between the three different 'chaos,' but they are also clearly specified as performing unique roles. Philosophy of art (aesthetics) creates concepts of sensations. And some types of abstract or conceptual art create sensations of concepts. This seems to clearly delineate the stakes of art and philosophy, and it would allow us to distinguish a philosophical use of philosophical concepts, when

they should be assessed in terms of their accuracy, rigour of use, and so on, and an artistic use of philosophical concepts, when they should be assessed in terms of the sensations produced by the works they have helped to create (rather than on their own terms). However, it is notable that everything in the arts for Deleuze and Guattari hinges around sensations, the capacity of sensations to be fixed in a monument, and to bring an unknown sensation into the world which defies commonsense opinion (*doxa*). In a few brief passages, this leads them to dismiss Conceptual art. Stephen Zepke has drawn out these brief comments to demonstrate the vast implications of this apparently passing dismissal. According to him, there are three key points on which Deleuze and Guattari criticise conceptual art:

1. The priority of the concept allows a “generalisation” of materials whereby anything can be art;
2. Conceptual artists’ enthusiastic embrace of reproduction technologies transforms sensation into “information” that is “reproducible to infinity”; and
3. Conceptual practices neutralise art’s ontological status by making sensation depend upon the “opinion” of the viewer, who decides whether or not it is art. (Zepke 2006, 158)

For Deleuze and Guattari, conceptual art can at most offer sensations of concepts. But they question the kinds of conceptual art which deliberately dematerialise their objects, and produce plans, programs, or pure descriptions of the artwork. Then, according to Deleuze and Guattari, whether or not such works are in fact art becomes nothing but a matter of opinion: such conceptual arts deliberately produce things which seem virtually indistinguishable from the everyday, and the sole artistic value is the question of whether or not it *is* art, an answer given simply as an opinion, one way or another, by anyone. For Deleuze and Guattari, such conceptual art thereby loses its power to challenge opinion and loses its value as art.

According to Zepke, Deleuze’s rejection of Conceptual art doesn’t just disqualify one small area of art practice (works of the 60’s associated with notable Conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth and Sol Le Witt): conceptual artistic strategies encompass the entire legacy of Duchamp (the first and third “errors” above can be traced back to his Readymades) and informs much of contemporary art. He writes that ‘Indeed, if we are to follow Deleuze and Guattari’s rejection of Conceptual art we will need all of our imagination to find abstract and vital aesthetic practices at work outside Deleuze’s stoic insistence on painting’s experimentations with colour, line and materials.’ (Zepke 2006: 162)

The danger here for my concerns is that this move then seems to reintroduce the hierarchical relation: philosophy tells art what is and isn’t legitimate for it to do, even to the extent of disqualifying much of the twentieth century art tradition. (The spectre of the belligerent art student wanting to punch the philosophy teacher in the face looms again!) To find a way beyond this, I want to suggest that we take up a thread found in the pages of *What is Philosophy?* itself and let it lead us to a preferable position. This thread is that of ‘non-philosophy.’

III

‘Non-philosophy’ is mentioned in a few places in *What is Philosophy?*, and reference is given to the work of François Laruelle, whom, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, ‘is engaged in one of the most interesting undertakings of contemporary philosophy.’ (1994: 220, n. 5) Despite this praise, Laruelle responded to the work to insist that his own project of ‘non-philosophy’ must be distinguished from the way Deleuze and Guattari understand this term.¹ He calls these ‘restricted’ (Deleuze and Guattari) and ‘general’ (Laruelle) non-philosophy. And I quote:

We will call “restricted” non-philosophy the type that still has its site in philosophy, which remains the master of its alterity or limitation, and ‘generalized’ non-philosophy the kind that issues from the vision-in-One and is effectuated as the unified theory of science and philosophy, generalizing philosophy under non-philosophical conditions. (Laruelle 2012: 52)

Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘restricted’ non-philosophy posits something *other* than philosophy as necessary for philosophy to encounter, to force it to think. This other could be art, or science, or something else. According to Laruelle, this non-philosophy simply perpetuates philosophy, and in fact works to uphold its ultimate privilege. He writes that ‘[p]erhaps it is precisely at the point when the philosopher seems to acknowledge the autonomy of science and of art that he most subtly denies it.’ (Laruelle 2012: 41).

According to Laruelle, all philosophy is determined by a structural invariant he calls the philosophical ‘Decision,’ which splits our view of the real between immanent datum (the conditioned ‘thing’ of experience we seek to explain) and ideal, transcendental factum (the ideal categories thought to condition the experienced thing), then positing a higher, transcendent principle which supposedly synthesises the two and guarantees that our ideal representations of reality actually have a purchase on it. This transcendent principle is philosophy itself. On Laruelle’s account, it doesn’t matter if the ‘immanent datum’ is posed as something radically other, impossible for transcendental principles to fully subsume (such as Kant’s ‘thing-in-itself,’ or art as sensation), since then it is the *relation* between immanent datum and transcendental factum, considered as a relation of pure difference, which the transcendent principle of philosophy claims to be able to think.

According to Laruelle, this mixing of immanence and transcendence, legitimated by philosophy’s own transcendence, amounts to thought’s claim to co-constitute the real, and to a circular logic of philosophy’s own self-legitimation (he calls this ‘the Principle of Sufficient Philosophy’).

By contrast to Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘restricted’ non-philosophy, Laruelle’s ‘general’ non-philosophy wants to challenge the claims of traditional philosophy, and ‘level’ its status with other practices of thinking (such as art). Laruelle’s work is directed towards breaking from the philosophical decision and attempting to think, and to think from, the pure immanence of the real (which he designates ‘the One’). This is the form of thought Laruelle calls ‘unilateralisation,’ which divests philosophical thought of its transcendental pretensions to be able to represent the real, and sees thought as part of the real itself. Laruelle calls the result ‘vision-in-One,’ because thought is seen as a partial view in the undivided unity of the real (the One). The One as a whole is radially foreclosed to thought (it cannot successfully be

¹ “I, the Philosopher, Am Lying”: A Reply to Deleuze” in Laruelle 2012.

represented), but thought can be understood to think the real insofar as it is itself part of the real.

Non-philosophy and its various stages of development (called ‘Philosophy II,’ ‘Philosophy III,’ etc.) is the result of Laruelle’s attempt to find a methodological solution to the difficult problem of how to think the real from or according to the real. In general, his solution is to maintain a strict dualism between thought and the real, which insists on the unilateral relation explained above. Since it makes no claim to a new theory which would better represent the real, non-philosophy continues to use philosophical concepts as its material, but *divested of their transcendental assumption to represent the real*. Instead (in the language of Philosophy III), thought is considered as a ‘transcendental clone’ of the real. This has an effect of *democratising* philosophical theories and systems – considered from the perspective of their radical foreclosure from the real, they are all equal with respects to the traditional philosophical claim (to have some purchase on the real).

John Mullarkey and Anthony Paul Smith write:

Non-philosophy is an abstract conception of philosophies that allows us to see them as equivalent in value. It enlarges the set of things that can count as thoughtful, a set that includes extant philosophy, but also a host of what are often presently deemed (by philosophers) to be non-philosophies and non-thinking (art, technology, natural science). [...] In this democracy of thinking, all thought is equalized *when regarded as* raw-material for non-philosophy, that is, as part of the Real rather than as representations of it. (Mullarkey and Smith 2012, 2)

It is here that the intuition guiding my move to Laruelle appears: non-philosophy makes philosophy *available as material*, and this is exactly how I think D & G in fact (in *A Thousand Plateaus*, at least) invite us to take their concepts. Despite his liberating views, Deleuze arguably commits a limiting defensive gesture when he insists on distinguishing art and philosophy by saying that while both think, the former thinks in sensations, the later in concepts. As Stephen Zepke and others have noted, this distinction leads to a disparagement of conceptual art. I propose that this limitation can be overcome by following Laruelle in seeing art and philosophy as equal modes of thought immanent to the real. A *non-philosophical use of philosophical concepts* would view philosophy not as a transcendent representation, but as a material which can be put to use in creating a work of art along with other quite different materials: paints, fixatives, supports, etc. This would support Deleuze’s invitation to a free use of his concepts, while overcoming the limitation of refusing to artists a use of materials which are *only* conceptual. Conceptual artists may then appear entirely legitimate, from this modified Deleuzean perspective, because they are fundamentally no different from artists who work with wood, plaster, neon, pixels, or any other non-philosophical materials. Non-philosophy humbles philosophical materials, so that they may be thrown in the studio corner along with piles of fabric, lumps of plaster, and cans of paint, to be taken up with such things in the process of creative working.

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