

REVIEW

Kathrin Thiele, *The Thought of Becoming: Gilles Deleuze's Poetics of Life* (Zurich-Berlin: Diaphanes, 2008), ISBN: 978-3037340363

In *The Thought of Becoming*, Kathrin Thiele elaborates Gilles Deleuze's ontology of immanence as a practice of ethics, whose concern with "this world" facilitates a thoroughgoing postmetaphysical approach to the problem of "how to think the ethical." She does so against the contemporary tendency to reduce ethics either to a totally abstract academic exercise, or a "watered down" discipline of "'applicable' approaches," and the subsequent impulse, for many, to have done with ethics altogether, in favour of the pragmatics of politics.¹ Indeed, she suggests that certain recent readings of Deleuze's work are symptomatic of these tendencies, failing to see that his "grammar of becoming" involves a thoroughly immanent, but fully articulated ethics, and variously accusing it of "extra-worldliness" (Badiou, Hallward) or reducing it to an activism (Hardt and Negri).² Hence, Thiele sets out to articulate the ethical stakes of Deleuze's ontology of immanence by attending to his "grammar of becoming" on its own terms, in particular, attempting a thoroughly Deleuzian reading of his work.

The construction of Deleuze's "plane of thought" that follows is not a simple *reconstruction*, therefore, but a dynamic "becoming thought" that seeks to be performatively faithful to the manner in which he "forces readers to *select* and *invent* new strategies when moving through his thought ... producing and creating" new thought.³ The point, for Thiele, is that Deleuze's ontology has ethical import precisely insofar as it is itself a dynamic "becoming-thought," which "always [immanently] leads somewhere else" thereby, constituting a practical and creative response to this world. (Indeed, ethics, Thiele argues, *becomes* imperceptible in Deleuze's ontology, which can lead to the perception that he is unconcerned with ethics.) If we are to avoid, with Deleuze, both "extra-worldliness" and mere activism, we must not simply repeat his concepts, she argues, but must also attend to *the very movement of his thought*, which is the performance of a consistently immanent ethics.

¹ Kathrin Thiele, *The Thought of Becoming: Gilles Deleuze's Poetics of Life* (Zürich-Berlin: Diaphanes, 2008), 11-13.

² *Ibid.*, 21.

³ Thiele, *The Thought of Becoming*, 31-32.

As indicated in her introductory chapter, Thiele's selected reading strategy is to examine Deleuze's treatment of the question of immanence itself, in particular, to trace how he comes to "think the world in a Spinozist way, sense it in a Bergsonian way, act in a Nietzschean way" in a pursuit of a conception of immanence that takes in, in turn, the key Deleuzian themes of "immanence, difference, repetition."⁴ In the three chapters that follow, there emerges an admirably lucid and subtle account of how, with very precise and careful conceptualisation, Deleuze constructs a consistent immanent ontology (and ethics) of becoming, in his engagements with "the conceptual personae" of Spinoza, Bergson and Nietzsche, without any sacrifice, on Thiele's part, of the complexity of these thinkers or the nuances of Deleuze's appropriation of their work. (Beyond its specific contribution to the question of Deleuze's ethics, Thiele's work would serve as an excellent introduction to his work, not least to how he constructs his own plane of thought through "minor" readings in the history of philosophy.) Moreover, in her careful attention to how these readings enable Deleuze continually to "move somewhere else," especially in her repeated efforts to "slow down" his thought and our reception of it, Thiele succeeds in conveying its characteristic movement and the new spaces of thought that that movement produces.

In Chapter 2, Thiele traces how Deleuze learns to think immanence as immanent only to itself, taking from Spinoza his non-analogising, non-totalising notion of a univocity, which "interweaves transcendence (*Deus*) and immanence (*Natura*)" into a "single plane"; and his related notion of substance "as absolute infinity; a single substance that is always already a multiplicity."⁵ Going to the heart of his reading, she elaborates how Deleuze, against Spinoza's own monism, "gives" to Spinoza the distinction between "what expresses itself, the expression itself, and what is expressed" such that paradoxically "'what is expressed' *has no existence* outside its expression, yet bears no resemblance to it, but relates *essentially* to what expresses itself as distinct from the expression itself."⁶ She carefully considers the consequence that the One of being is "like the surface of the sea ... a surface of multiplicity, a One not of *already constituted* units, but a One that only ever becomes in its very expressions," such that essence is equated with existence, and the process of expression is an infinite movement of production.⁷

The third chapter explores how Deleuze is led to Bergson by the question that is left unanswered by Spinoza: how a thought of such immanence is possible. Thiele draws out the significance of Bergson's method of intuition for Deleuze, how rather than "looking merely at the phenomenal world" it allows him to "follow the internal lines of things 'up' to where they become pure tendencies that encounter each other," not via some transcendental a priori, but

⁴ Ibid., 116, quotation slightly amended.

⁵ Thiele, *The Thought of Becoming*, 33-34, 53.

⁶ Ibid., 61; Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. Trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 333.

⁷ Thiele, *The Thought of Becoming*, 59.

by returning to things themselves as pure tendencies characterised by contradictory “movements.”⁸ In turn, she examines how Deleuze can, consequently, conceive of the “actualization of the virtual” as involving, not merely the differences of degree of an already constituted world, but the production of differences of kind (and genuinely different possible worlds). Finally, Thiele examines the centrality, to this thinking of immanence, of Bergson’s conception of “duration”: the “real time” we experience – a time “which differs from itself” – such that there is neither a priority of the One or the Many, but a complex movement of oneness and multiplicity, which is the condition and context of a thought of immanence.⁹

Chapter 4, in turn, considers how Nietzsche allows Deleuze to answer the question left unanswered by Bergson’s concern with metaphysical practice rather than with ethics as such: “how is it that this thought can pass the test that it is truly difference and differing?”¹⁰ Here Thiele leads us through the subtleties of the affirmation of life that is the Nietzschean will to power, in Deleuze’s reading: that singular element, that is neither individual will or desire in any traditional sense, but that “differential and thus invisible moving element that drives or structures everything without ever being ‘present in the strict sense,’ because it will only ever *become* in this process.”¹¹ She shows how, mediated through the notion of the eternal return, it is that singular moment of willing the return of difference itself, an affirmative act that brings to expression and actualization, the differing that is integral to life, but may be obscured by reduction of reality to the actual. In brief, it is the “impersonal” will to life, without whose expressive affirmation of difference, there would *be* no differing. Thus, Deleuze can be seen not only to derive from Spinoza a consistent immanent ontology, and from Bergson the resources for conceptualising the immanent thinking of difference, but, from Nietzsche, the notion that thinking difference is sustainable only as an ethical affirmation of difference and life.

In drawing together this “poet(h)ics” of becoming, the final chapter crystallises the ethical force of Deleuze’s work and counters what Thiele considers the most important of the recent critiques of his ethics: Badiou’s notion that Deleuze merely perpetually actualizes new virtualities. Here, Thiele argues that, although it is always a multiplicity, there is ever only one virtuality – that is, it is never simply a matter of turning from the actual to the virtual as an alternative realm of being (the virtual is governed by a logic of *becoming*), but of thinking the virtual of the actual, as a creative thinking of the specific possibilities of difference present within any given situation. It is, therefore, not that Deleuze pursues novelty as a kind of ludic postmodern celebration of a groundless mode of being. Rather actualization of the virtual, Thiele argues, is a returning to the surface of things, a “surfing” of the tendencies whose movement supports, yet is obscured by the actual and our

⁸ Thiele, *The Thought of Becoming*, 103.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 107-108.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

acceptance of it as the “given”¹² Indeed, the movement of becoming inherent to the actualization of the virtual is, moreover, a contradictory Bergsonian movement in multiple directions at once, so that it is never simply available, but always a problem to be resolved. In Deleuze’s later terminology, one never knows what “a life” is. Instead, one repeatedly encounters, from within situations, the problem of “what is to be done *next*.”¹³ As Thiele puts it multiplicity is always a “multiplicity” – a creative and productive engagement with the specific fold between the virtual and the actual.¹⁴ As such, Thiele can convincingly conclude that Deleuze’s ontology, in spite of its apparent “extra-worldliness,” constitutes an ethics profoundly grounded in the reality of “this world.”

Of particular interest to Foucault scholars will be the suggestive, if complex parallels Thiele finds between Foucault’s and Deleuze’s respective emphasis upon the notion of “life” in their final works (in particular, between Deleuze’s impersonal ethics of “a life...” and Foucault’s “aesthetics of existence”).¹⁵ If by contrast with Foucault’s deep-seated caution concerning life, “the liberation of life in this creation of a *life*... is undoubted by Deleuze,” it is not, she argues, because the latter is a utopian vitalist. Rather, he is equally realist concerning human actions, but deliberately probes what “a body is capable of.”¹⁶ We cannot understand Deleuze properly here unless we grasp once more that a life emerges from the interplay between the pure immanence (the virtual) and all the moments a living subject goes through (the actual). Although not elaborated by Thiele, there are significant resonances to be explored here with the dynamic ethical relation to the self of Foucault’s later work.

Nevertheless, a caution is required which highlights a potential limit to Thiele’s otherwise excellent study. Thiele tends to play down the distance between Foucault and Deleuze – a distance Eleanor Kaufmann has shown to have haunted Deleuze¹⁷ – referring primarily to the former’s 1967 “*Theatrum Philosophicum*” in support of the significance of the latter’s ethics. What is missing here is not simply a Foucauldian suspicion of the category of “life” (and of a politics of “desire” built upon it), but the deeper intuition of his later work – highlighted by Judith Butler¹⁸ – that an immanent ethics must remain open to what is

¹² Thiele, *The Thought of Becoming*, 195ff.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁵ Foucault’s final published work, “*La vie: l’expérience et la science*”, was a revised version of his introduction to Canguilhem’s *Normal and Pathological*, contributed to a volume devoted to the latter’s work. See Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits, 1954-1988, II*. Ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald. 2 Volumes (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2001), 1582-1595.

¹⁶ Thiele, *The Thought of Becoming*, 172.

¹⁷ See Eleanor Kaufmann, *The Delirium of Praise: Bataille, Blanchot, Deleuze, Foucault, Klossowski* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 77ff. Kaufmann argues that it is precisely “Foucault-as-thought” that haunts Deleuze.

¹⁸ See Judith Butler, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” in David Ingram, ed., *The Political: Readings in Continental Philosophy* (London: Basil Blackwell, 2002), 212-227

radically “other,” even to possibilities which would appear to violate immanence (for Foucault, the possibility that an “originary will” is necessary to freedom, or that Christian mystical experience provides the matrix of modern critique, etc.), if such an ethics is to recognise the “specificity” of its articulation of the “singular” and avoid subtly re-inscribing a transcendental horizon of thought.¹⁹ Thought must “proceed by crises,” as Deleuze acknowledged Foucault’s (and others’) thought to proceed,²⁰ in a repeated placing in question of the very possibility of thought, to the point, if necessary, of its radical reconceptualization.

The Foucauldian challenge to Deleuze, then, is not primarily centred on any putative “utopianism” but more fundamentally on how his thought responds to the specificity, not only of his strategy of exploring what a “body is capable of,” but of the conceptual specificity, which such a strategy allows Deleuze to pursue (a “naive” pursuit of the ontology of becoming, as Deleuze tended to describe it). How does Deleuze’s “becoming thought” avoid setting the conceptual specificity of his articulation of the singular (e.g., of the ontology developed through the Spinoza-Bergson-Nietzsche series) as a partial (transcendental) limit that tends to reprioritise the oneness of being over multiplicity? It is in this sense that, although, arguably, in significant part misplaced, the critique of Badiou touches upon a significant question for a Deleuzian ethics. It is not that Deleuze’s thought may well not have the resources to deal adequately with this question, but it would seem to invite the possibility that the pursuit of a Deleuzian ethics may require of us to “move somewhere else” again in relation to his becoming-thought, a grasping of how its movement carries a Deleuzian ethics somewhere else beyond itself.²¹ One of the many merits of Kathrin Thiele’s study is to have mapped the ethical movement of that thought in all of its subtlety, sophistication and power.

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¹⁹ Every effort to define conceptually the plane of the singular will, as a limited specific conceptualisation, threaten to circumscribe the singular (event) in advance. See Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?” in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 72-74.

²⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Pourparlers, 1972-1990* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1990), 142.

²¹ Perhaps, it is necessary to rediscover the seismic crises in Deleuze, that he considers to affect every thought (see Deleuze, *Pourparlers*, 142), and that may be obscured by his later conception of a single plane of thought; or, again, perhaps, it is necessary to “give” concepts to Deleuze, no more than he gives them to Spinoza, Bergson and Nietzsche, to enable us to think immanently today with Deleuze beyond the specificity of his context, concerns and concepts.

²² This review has been prepared with the support of funding by the Irish Jesuits through Milltown Institute.