Deleuze’s Differential Ontology and the Problem of Ethics

Hannah Stark

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 Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
 University of Adelaide
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Abstract

This thesis is centrally concerned with difference and its place in ethical theory, particularly as it is influenced by the continental tradition. It takes ethical theory — and philosophy more generally — not to be a reflection of the world but a constructed, and therefore ideologically invested, system of meaning. Because philosophy is a form of representation with a world-making function, the political impetus of this thesis is to interrogate the frameworks through which ethical theory is currently being asserted, and the meanings which they both enable and constrain.

To this end, I begin by mapping the trajectory of the turn to ethics in literary theory in order to examine how “recognition” is gaining considerable currency in debates about the structures of relation between the subject and its surroundings. Locating recognition as part of the legacy of Hegel, I question the ways in which this system theorises the relation to alterity. I take Judith Butler’s work to be exemplary of the recognition-paradigm in ethical theory, and critically examine the impact of this framework on the model of alterity she proposes. I then look to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, whose ethics of absolute alterity at first would appear to move beyond this problem of recognition that haunts poststructuralist discourse. However, I do not find in Levinas’ work a viable alternative to Hegelian recognition. These philosophers, I argue, offer a version of difference which limits its conceptual potential as alterity. For this reason my thesis focuses in detail on the philosophy of difference proposed by Gilles Deleuze.

In Deleuze’s work I find an alternative to the recognition-based ethics that has become so prevalent in contemporary critical theory. I trace his rejection of Hegel through his early works on the history of philosophy, and claim that his differential method of reading enables him to develop his own ontology. While I examine Deleuze’s revision of Plato, Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche and Bergson, I am particularly interested in the potential that his revision of Leibniz’s work has for ethical theory. This concern permeates the last three chapters of my thesis, which focus on Difference and Repetition. My interest is in the metaphysical primacy which Deleuze affords to both difference and the differential relation. I claim that because Deleuze’s notion of difference is premised on a fundamental relationality, his ontology is foundationally differential. My final chapter specifies the difference between Deleuze and Hegel as something which emerges through their differing interpretations of differential calculus. Although this interpretive divergence is concerned with things that are minuscule in scale, it is important because it determines their respective theorisations of ontology. My concluding chapter argues that the difference between Deleuze and Hegel enables the coopting of Deleuze’s work to theorise the ethical relation of the subject to alterity and thereby situate ethics beyond recognition.
Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma in any university of other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Signed

Hannah Stark
19 November 2010
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