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Ontologies of Productive Borders

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Following the agenda set for this first work group meeting to work on the concept of border in general, my talk will be on a very general level on the concept of border. It will not be on conceptualizing border as if we already knew empirically what a border is, but instead on border in a more abstract sense: on border as a difference between two, a separation of dissimilars. It is on being, becoming, doing of, or making appear of a border as a philosophical issue, and in this sense on ontology of border.

My interest will be particularly in the productivity of borders, in the fact that every drawing of a borderline where previously there was none produces not only distinction but also new identities of those which are differentiated.

The philosophical problem of identity and difference, in the meaning of one-and-the same -ness of a thing and distinguishing it from that which is not the same - that is, the problem of individuating, is an *ontological* border-issue par excellence. In similar fashion, every classification constitutes an *epistemological* border-issue.

Most classical philosophers have been occupied with the issue of border in the sense of either individuating or classification. Just to mention a few: Aristotle in his systems of species, genus and *differentia specifica*, and Leibniz by providing the definition for identity as identity of the indiscernibles. Hegel was intensely occupied by border, in the meaning of continuously moving from a thing, its sameness, its identity, to what is different from it, to what is not-it through negation, this differentiation being the motor of proceeding in his thought. In this talk I will consider two contemporary thinkers in this tradition of philosophy and border, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. I will do this very partially, of course, as both are

complicated thinkers, and very provisionally, as this is an invitation to provoke and discuss rather than to conclude.

In order to be concrete and to avoid philosophical omni-temporality, I will also draw in my discussion from the two historical processes of creating productive borders. The first one is that of a politico-geographical border, productive of nationality and in multiple meanings of national identity; and the second is a classification in the realm of scientific knowledge, productive of serious effects on lives. I will first briefly introduce these two historical events, before moving on to the differences between Deleuze and Derrida in thinking of difference.

My first example of the drawing of a border was done after the Napoleonic wars in 1809, when new geopolitical borders were drawn across the map of Europe. Part of this procedure at the North-Eastern corner of the map was a new border which detached the area now known as Finland from Sweden, attaching it instead to the Russian Empire. At the time, this was not felt as a huge event in the lives of most people living in this area: the aristocrats easily shifted their loyalty from one court to another, and the Finnish speaking peasants did not understand Swedish any better than Russian. The intellectual life and social life of the educated in the country went on in Latin and Swedish, as before. Nevertheless, the separation of the area into something distinct from the rest of Sweden, of which it had been a part for 700 years, many historians argue, was productive of difference which later became an identity of the nation Finland. Similarly, the new border was also productive of a new identity of Sweden, which, from this time onwards was securely on its way towards appearing as a nation instead of an Empire.

The production of Finnish identity was an effect of many elements: the Herderian ideas of language and custom as constituting a people, and the political ideas of

people having the right to self-regulation. However, one can argue, had the space for the cultural-political self-reflection not been provided for the Swedish-speaking cultural elite of the region by the new border which created the difference, the identity construction might not have happened - at this time when so much more contributed to it and made it likely.

The second border case is one of classification within the field of knowledge and the case is well known: I am referring to the history of the 19th century science of sexuality, *Sexualwissenschaft*, which introduced categories of different sexualities. The identity of homosexuality as one thing was produced by drawing a classificatory border between it and normal sexuality. The identity of *heterosexuality* was thereby implied, (and as Foucault pointed out, the identity of sexuality itself as well). In addition to this epistemic classificatory borderline, again, other elements also contributed to the production of the high degree of reality the identity “homosexuality” culturally has today in the Western World, not only in the realm of knowledge but also in cultural politics and life. But again, many argue that had the border (the epistemic distinction) homosexuality/heterosexuality not been drawn at that time, the homosexuals might not be there, just as Finns might not be there.

Now, the interesting question in both cases from an ontological point of view, and one that can be argued back and forth, is whether there is a difference to begin with without the borderline being drawn in these cases, or whether it was the border that was productive of the difference and the identity concerned. The Finns were different from the Swedes to begin with: they spoke a different language, many would say; there has also been a time when some have even referred to race in marking this difference. Others might argue that the Häme people, the Karelia people and the

western Finns were different in many ways, also in their speech before Finnish was, artificially, made into one language.

Similarly there are those who insist that on the level of corporeal experience there has always been homosexuality and the classification just brought up what had already existed. Whereas others maintain that other categorizations could have been produced just as well, and in that case, perhaps, those distinctions would have directed the life in the queer continuity of sexuality into unknown directions.

It is in this juncture of thinking of borders creating identities such as Finns or homosexuals in distinction to not Finns and not homosexuals that I invoke Derrida and Deleuze as thinkers of identity and difference and as pursuing different kinds of ontological attachments in this issue. I will be very general and sketchy, and textually, I will limit myself primarily on Deleuze's book *Difference and Repetition* and Derrida's article "Différance".

Deleuze's major topic in *Difference and Repetition* is the philosophical problem of individuating. He draws on Aristotle, Duns Scotus, Leibniz, Kant and Spinoza, and primarily opposes Hegel in thinking of sameness and difference, developing an ontology of "pure difference" and avoiding identities and negation. Instead of the sameness of particular things there is one multitude and endless becoming in small variations (repetition), and instead of difference in between (individuated things) there is difference in itself.

Derrida, in his signature article *différance*, takes issue with the Saussurian structuralist system of signs in which one identity is a negation of another. By replacing the Saussurian difference with *différance* written with an "a", he emphasizes, among other things, the sense of "activity", of "movement" and "productivity" instead of the static in structuralism. As he says himself: "*Différance* is

the “productive” movement of differences, the “history”, [if that can still be said], of constituted difference, [of constituted langue, of (al)ready made *langue*.]”¹

Another point of Derrida’s here, and elsewhere, is that meaning can never be contained in a sign, it spills over, it takes detours and is deferred; the distinction between one and the same and the different cannot be drawn as a clear line. And a more ontological point he makes is about the metaphysics of presence in meaning. His position is against ontology of both substance and subject, and this anti-ontological gesture is something which is always active in Derrida’s work.²

An ambition joined by Derrida and Deleuze in these texts, it would seem, is the attempt to find a way to describe difference that is less than a contradiction or negation.³ Many interpreters, for example Patton and Protevi (2003, 3-4), as well as Descombes (1980), have emphasized the convergence of the two thinkers in developing a non-Hegelian and anti-identitarian philosophical approach. However, I would see a much more profound distinction between the two, and that is in their respective ontological approaches, carried through within the discussion on difference.

¹ He says: “What displaces the a of *différance* in the sense of “activity”, of “movement” and “productivity” is this static and statistical structuralism *Différance* is the “productive” movement of differences, the “history”, if that can still be said, of constituted difference, of constituted langue, of (al)ready made *langue*.” S. 85, Derrida, Jacques. “The Original Discussion Of “Différance” (1968).” In *Derrida and Différance*, edited by David Wood and Robert Bernasconi, 83-97. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988

² Derrida emphasizes himself the motivation of braking with the activity and passivity, that he was pursuing “a though that would frustrate the simple opposition between the active and the passive” s. 84, Derrida, Jacques. “The Original Discussion Of “Différance” (1968).” In *Derrida and Différance*, edited by David Wood and Robert Bernasconi, 83-97. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988.

³ See also Patton and Protevi, (p. 3) who note that Derrida himself, in his eulogy for Deleuze listed among their on their points of agreement: “the [thesis] concerning an irreducible difference that is in opposition to dialectical opposition, a difference “more profound” than a contradiction (Difference and Repetition), a difference in the joyously repeated affirmation (“yes, yes”), a taking into account of the simulacrum” (Derrida 2001a, 192-3). Also Descombes (1980).

Also, it is clear, and pointed out by many scholars, that Derrida is drawing much more positively from the Hegelian heritage than Deleuze, which also establishes a clear distinction between the two.

The main difference in approach which I see between Deleuze and Derrida is in how Deleuze constructs ontological depth and how Derrida avoids this.

In the preface of *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze proposes to study the “more profound game of difference and repetition” which is “the forces that act under the representation of the identical” (ix). The direction to “profoundness” and towards exposure of that which is or acts “under”, is essential in Deleuze’s approach, and it is not shared by Derrida, who, in contrast, and in a manner not the same as, but reminiscent of Hegel, proceeds in his thought from concept to concept, or word to word, although not by mere negation, but rather by exposing the limitations of too total a meaning, pointing to the always remaining excess, and proceeding through variation by variation – and never referring outside of this proceeding of concepts and their traces; not referring to any more profound level of difference.

What is the “difference in itself” for Deleuze, this more profound difference, which is not caught by representations, by conventional drawing of conceptual border lines? In chapter “Difference in itself” of *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze writes in the beginning:

“The difference ‘between’ two things is only empirical, and the corresponding determinations are only extrinsic. However, instead of something distinguished from something else, imagine something which distinguishes itself – and yet that from

which it distinguishes itself does not distinguish itself from it. Lightning, for example, distinguishes itself from the black sky but must also trail it behind, as though it were distinguishing itself from that which does not distinguish itself from it. It is as if the ground rose to the surface, without ceasing to be ground” (28).

Referring to the ground and the surface is a recurrent way of writing for Deleuze, it is also the manner in which he characterizes significant political events. Of the events of May 1968 he says: “The people who hate ’68, or say it was a mistake, see it as something symbolic or imaginary. But that’s precisely what it wasn’t, it was pure reality breaking through” (Deleuze 1995: 144-5; Patton&Protevi: 7.) “Pure reality breaking through” involves a double structure of underlying reality and surface, or as Deleuze often expresses it, a double structure of, on the one hand, chaos of intensities, repetitions and pure differences, and on the other hand, representations. This double structure is something Derrida would not endorse ontologically. Derrida precisely avoids the construction of not only a metaphysical a level of substance, which is Deleuze’s chaos, or matter, but also of any ontology. Derrida’s philosophizing is decidedly outside the traditional philosophical ontological question of “what is that what is”. In comparison to him, Deleuze acts much more traditionally as a philosopher.

At the outset it looks like Deleuze would have a criticism similar to Derrida in the limits about any conceptual, or categorical differentiation: a concept like “a Finn” or “a homosexual” appearing too static.⁴

However, when Derrida looks precisely at the historical becoming of the concepts, the traces they involve and at the multiple meanings that make them move,

⁴ A concept he points out, blocks the predicates, which keep on moving in the thing itself (p.12).

Deleuze seems to often start from the conceptual distinctions as if in a timeless universe of philosophy, science or mathematics. To counter the fixity of conceptual borders, then, a dimension of ontological depth is needed to work as the more profound layer of “pure differences” which comprises actual motion, change, the new, and event, and which only erupts at the surface not actually being able to be accountable. Therefore on the basis of a Deleuzian approach, as far as I can see it, it would be difficult to produce an historical account of coming into being of a difference; of a border and an identity.

Considering the two cases of border mentioned earlier, for example, how could a Deleuzian account be envisioned? Deleuze writes: “ There are internal differences which dramatize the Idea before representing an object. “ (26) He refers to the Kantian “Idea” and to some neo-Kantian interpretations according to which: “there is a step-by-step, internal, dynamic construction of space which must precede the ‘representation’ of the whole as consist of intensive quantity rather than schema, and to be related to Idea rather than to concept of understanding” (26).

One could think that in a Deleuzian mode before the actual border was drawn, before the categories of homosexual and before the geo-political border, something has happened at the deeper level. The emergence of the classification could be seen as a surfacing of something, which has already been accumulating for a long time and has been capable of being sensed, although never caught by a conceptual distinction.

In this sense, one could think that in a Deleuzian account there was something like homosexuality before the classification, and the classification does not bring anything new to it, it merely brings it to the surface. Similarly, the geopolitical border would have been in the process before the representation of it.

The trouble with this kind of account of a historical event is that it ends up actually downplaying contingency, action and event in history [and functioning in an explanatory mode]. Despite of the explicit emphasis of Deleuze of being interested in nothing but change and opening up thought for future, there is a certain sense of stability involved at the outset in the approach.

I would suspect that this sense of stability is there because Deleuze, despite his genuine concern about becoming and future, and his concern for time, actually functions in what I, with Derrida's term, would call "philosophical omnitemporality". His gaze is directed at the classifications which are in no place and no time, in the same way as Aristotle's classifications, or mathematics and science, which are his inspirations. He philosophises about the continuous becoming, and metamorphosis, but as an abstraction of any particular time or place.

In this Derrida is very different. He is quite wholeheartedly against the philosophical ever present time, never failing to point out that he speaks and writes in a particular setting, within particular tradition, particular situation, and also, always in a particular language.

For Derrida the border issue that he takes up with *differance*, is not in order to point out that there is a more profound, or more real, more minute distinction process going on at the depths of ontological matter, which can not be approached by the crude conceptual distinction, say the ones between Finn and not Finn, a homosexual and a non-homosexual. Much more than this, his point implies that these distinctions are always made at particular place and particular time, in relations to particular other concepts, and that they never succeed in being complete and abstract and confined to their own meaning and references as they claim to do, but that they are profoundly relative and prone to move on. Derrida avoids further ontological commitments, there

is the incessant motion of concepts, categories, borders, which do not correspond in better or worse way to the real being. They do carry traces from the past, they perform detours, they defer the meaning, and they do something, but they do not primarily gather previous sense or experience.

In this sense I could see the Derridean account of what has been happening in drawing of the borders in the two cases we have at hand to be interested exactly in the various histories of their concrete becoming, and keeping in mind that it could also have been the case that they had not become. There is also a sense of productivity of borders in Derrida's texts, although his focus on meaning production in language makes it harder to see than, for example, in Foucault's work, in which the more concretely historical productivity and power of borders to disseminate effects is so clearly present. Nevertheless, it is history that is in the heart of Derrida's work as well.

In other words as an answer to the question I posed in the beginning of the explorations on the different ontologies resulting in different accounts of the border lines, it seems to me that each drawing of a border would appear interesting and productive of ever changing identity and difference in the Derridian anti-ontological re-appropriation of Hegelian historicizing conceptual movement. Read through Deleuzian ontology, borders would be secondary appearances of something more interesting and more profound, and in themselves a product of differences, of "difference in itself".

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