

Worldly Religion in Deleuze and Whitehead: On the Possibility of a Secular Divinity

By Matthew David Segall ~ December 18th, 2012

***"Behold, I am making all things new."
-Revelation 21:5***

The purpose of this essay is to unpack Deleuze and Whitehead's philosophical contributions to the task of re-thinking religion in an increasingly post-everything world no longer certain of its own secularity. "The secularization of the concept of God's functions in the world," argued Whitehead in 1927, "is at least as urgent a requisite of thought as is the secularization of other elements in experience."¹ With a similar sense of urgency, Deleuze (and Guattari) argued in 1991 that, in an age when "we have so many reasons not to believe in the human world," philosophy's most pressing task is to "give birth to new modes of existence, closer to animals and rocks," modes of existence which renew "[belief] in this world, in this life."² Deleuze's emphasis on *immanence* as against transcendence, on *this world* as opposed to the next, should not be read as a blanket dismissal of spiritual practice. On the contrary, for Deleuze, the creative thinking demanded by philosophical inquiry invites infinite cosmic forces into the finite human mind, making philosophy an "initiatory...spiritual ordeal."³ Philosophers are those who dare to welcome such dangerous forces, risking not only their academic reputations,⁴ but the habit-formed security of their egos. Philosophers do not simply reflect ideas, they allow ideas to enter into and transform them:

¹ Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Free Press, 1929/1978), 207.

² Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 74.

³ Joshua Ramey, *The Hermetic Deleuze: Philosophy and Spiritual Ordeal* (London: Duke University Press, 2012), 2.

⁴ See Ramey, *The Hermetic Deleuze*, 6: There exists a "general academic-philosophical prejudice against the threatening proximity of intuitive, mystical, or even simply more emotional modes of mind to the cold calculations of pure reason..."

This is because one does not think without becoming something else, something that does not think—an animal, a molecule, a particle—and that comes back to thought and revives it.⁵

Deleuze calls for a radical break with all forms of unthinking commonsense—be it scientific or religious—through the intercession of singular concepts animated by personalities who are both willing to continually confront the absolute horizon of the plane of immanence and able to fold the infinite movements of *Nous* and *Physis* back into one another “like a gigantic shuttle.”⁶ Philosophical thinking, unlike dogmatic religion or hubristic science, does not paint the firmament on an umbrella, as if this might hold the ever-rising tide of the maelstrom at bay; rather, genuine philosophical thinking requires “[tearing] open the firmament and [plunging] into the chaos.”⁷ As we will see, however, philosophy’s role cannot only be to descend into the swirling depths of the sea: it must also return to the surface with the good news.

Whitehead, for his part, has Jamesian tendencies that would at first glance seem to ally his philosophical efforts to the pragmatic interests of commonsense. “The philosophy of organism,” he wrote, “is an attempt, with the minimum of critical adjustment, to return to the concepts of ‘the vulgar.’”⁸ Whitehead made this comment in the context of a skeptical attack on behalf of commonsense experience mounted against the mechanistic abstractions of Newton (who dismissed the mathematically-naïve sense-based opinions of “the vulgar”) and the transcendental abstractions of Kant (who opposed derivative sensory appearances to ultimate substantial reality). Whitehead was well aware of the danger of hyperbole.⁹ In this case, however, it seems he fell prey to the danger of understatement. The “critical adjustment” his cosmology requires of the commonsense opinions of modern people can hardly be described as “minimal.” By the time Whitehead has finished his adventure in cosmologizing, not only will God have become creaturely, but electromagnetic vectors will have been transformed into erotic currents of emotion and atoms will have been endowed with life.

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 42.

⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 38, 89, 177.

⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 202.

⁸ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 72.

⁹ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 7: “The chief error in philosophy is overstatement.”

As if this were not strange enough, Whitehead's cosmology of creativity requires that we come to understand the very substance of the soul—our felt-sense of personal continuity—as but a precariously linked “route of presiding occasions...[wandering] from part to part of the brain,” always vulnerable to dislocations and interruptions which “in primitive times [were] interpreted as demoniac possession.”¹⁰ Contrary to much religious commonsense, which has it that each soul is fully-formed in heaven by God and so remains eternally the same throughout life (and perhaps after), for Whitehead, the soul comes to matter to us precisely because it is always at risk of being “captured, reduced to wandering, enslaved.”¹¹ No longer securely fashioned by God into a fixed and self-same identity, the soul becomes a social value whose unity is never simply given but always remains to be achieved. The soul is a swarming community of “larval subjects” needing to be repeatedly composed or concreated out of the chaotic perceptual and affective materials of life.¹² “Being a soul” from the perspective of Whitehead's process ontology is a deeply problematic situation, since one never simply *is* but must continually *become*-soul. “Losing one's hold [going mad],” in the context of a Whiteheadian psychology, “becomes...the paradigmatic disaster, or else...the precondition of any initiation or any spiritual transformation.”¹³ It would seem that neither the traditional theologian nor the classical physicist, much less the average modern business owner, government employee, or homemaker, could feel at home in such a strange Whiteheadian universe!

Both Deleuze and Whitehead generated concepts in response to encounters with in non-ordinary problematics, which is to say that the solutions distilled by their concepts problematize naïve egoic subjectivity by acting as alchemical catalysts that alter not only the contents of conscious thoughts, but the unconscious imaginative background of thought itself, thereby repositioning thinking on new, as yet undetected planes of immanence. They are *hermetic* thinkers whose philosophizing was in service not only to theoretical explanation, but to worldly renewal by way of the intensification of the hermeneutical depths of aesthetic experience. It is important in the context of Whitehead and Deleuze's efforts to creatively disrupt and transform commonsense experience to forge connections with the project of establishing coherent social values and just

¹⁰ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 107-109.

¹¹ Isabelle Stengers, *Thinking With Whitehead* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 443.

¹² Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, transl. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 1994/2004), 145.

¹³ Stengers, *Thinking With Whitehead*, 443.

political institutions. Deleuze's philosophy has been criticized for being "politically irrelevant" by Peter Hallward due to its perceived "otherworldliness."¹⁴ Isabelle Stengers has also criticized Deleuze's tendency to celebrate the adventures of solitary, heroic creators who fearlessly dive into chaos while at the same time downplaying the conditions of creativity provided by their habitat and their inevitable need for social recuperation upon returning to consensual reality:

...all creators have learned [what] makes them able to "dive" without being swallowed. A dive cannot be improvised, but demands equipment. Unlike those who may happen to "sink" into chaos, creators are those who know what they experience "matters," and that they will be able to recount something of what has happened to them, that is to come back...even from the land of the dead.¹⁵

Stengers' contrasts Deleuze's celebration of unhinged creativity with Whitehead's tremendous respect for history and continual emphasis upon the importance of acquiring new habits in a way that is sensitive to the habitat they depend upon. "Each task of creation," writes Whitehead, "is a social effort, employing the whole universe."¹⁶ While Hallward's claim may or may not be justified, Stengers' modest Whiteheadian corrective to Deleuze's penchant for skinny dipping in the Acheron allows us to receive much insight and inspiration from the latter without forgetting the perhaps more pertinent imperative of the former regarding the worldly responsibility of the philosopher:

...[to] seek the evidence for that conception of the universe which is the justification for the ideals characterizing the civilized phases of human society.¹⁷

When it comes to the influence of the mainline religious traditions of the West upon philosophy, both Whitehead and Deleuze are forced to lob devastating rebukes. Whitehead's ire is almost always directed at the idolatrous habit of conceiving of God along the lines of an all-powerful imperial ruler or distant unmoved mover.¹⁸ "Religion," writes Whitehead, "has emerged into

¹⁴ Peter Hallward, *Out of this World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* (London: Verso Books, 2006); quoted in Ramey, *The Hermetic Deleuze*, 226n9.

¹⁵ Stengers, *Thinking With Whitehead*, 272.

¹⁶ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 275.

¹⁷ Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1938/1968), 105.

¹⁸ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 343.

human experience mixed with the crudest fancies of barbaric imagination.”¹⁹ Deleuze also mocks the idea of a “great despot” or “imperial State in the sky or on earth” so typical of monotheistic commonsense.²⁰ While this particular habit of religious thought is deemed dispensable, Whitehead is unwilling to jettison religious values outright, despite calls by the modern-minded to found civilization instead upon the abstractions of mechanistic science:

Unfortunately for this smug endeavor to view the universe as the incarnation of the commonplace, the impact of aesthetic, religious, and moral notions is inescapable. They are the disrupting and the energizing forces of civilization.²¹

In particular, Whitehead points to the “Galilean origin of Christianity” as an example of a non-despotic religious persona: Christ. Christ “neither rules, nor is unmoved,” but “dwells upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love.”²² Deleuze also singles out Christian philosophy, both for praise and for disparagement. Those pre-modern Christian philosophers (like Cusa, Eckhart, and Bruno) who were bold enough to challenge church authority and risk their lives by injecting at least a dose of immanence into Physis and Nous still refused in the end to “compromise the transcendence of a God to which immanence must be attributed only secondarily.”²³ Later modern Christian philosophers (like Pascal and Kierkegaard), though they were still men of faith, created concepts that recharged, rather than diminished, immanence. They were

concerned no longer with the transcendent existence of God but only with the infinite immanent possibilities brought by the one who believes that God exists.²⁴

Deleuze suggests that, in the modern period, *belief* replaced *knowledge* as the dominant image of thought.²⁵ The “will to truth” that had guided philosophy for so long lost its viability, as with the new technical power of modernity came also a crippling epistemic skepticism, an inability to

¹⁹ Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925/1960), 192. The contemplative conception of God as unmoved mover is obviously not as crude; what it lacks is the emotional and moral intensity required to engender religious vision.

²⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 43.

²¹ Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 19.

²² Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 343.

²³ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 45.

²⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 74.

²⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 53.

grasp truth outright. No longer could the productivity of thought be “guaranteed in advance by the inherent connection between the good and the true”; rather, Deleuze believed that philosophical thought in the modern period required “trespass and violence,” treating the thinker of thought not as a trustworthy friend, but as an enemy.²⁶ Truth is now to be *inferred* at best, tracked with suspicion but without certainty. The new plane of belief is not simply destructive or crippling, however: it is also the necessary condition for the actualization of new mental and physical experiences. As with the Christian thinkers of immanence, Deleuze emphasized the “unforeseeable directions of thought and practice” that belief makes possible, directions to be judged not based on the *object* of a belief, but on a belief’s *effect*.²⁷ A related feature of modern philosophy for Deleuze results from thought’s encounter and struggle with the unrepresentable natural forces underlying perceptual and affective experience, forces which paradoxically “*must* but *cannot* be thought.”²⁸ Given modern thought’s confrontation with the infinite forces of cosmogenesis, its concepts can no longer be understood to represent a stable reality or to mirror a static cosmos; rather, “what matters...in an idea is...the range of experimental possibility it opens onto.”²⁹

Whitehead shares with Deleuze a sense for the importance of pragmatic, experimental thinking. In the context of religious experimentation, asking whether or not God really exists becomes irrelevant. What becomes important is the sort of thoughts and practices that *belief* in God makes possible for the believer, and for the society to which the believer belongs. “The power of God,” writes Whitehead, “is the worship He inspires.”³⁰ “The fact of the religious vision,” he continues, and its history of persistent expansion, is our one ground for optimism. Apart from it, human life is a flash of occasional enjoyments lighting up a mass of pain and misery, a bagatelle of transient experience.³¹

The “religious vision,” as Whitehead understands it, “gives meaning to all that passes, and yet eludes apprehension,” providing life with “something which is the ultimate ideal, and the

²⁶ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 139.

²⁷ Ramey, *The Hermetic Deleuze*, 13.

²⁸ Ramey, *The Hermetic Deleuze*, 16.

²⁹ Ramey, *The Hermetic Deleuze*, 16-17.

³⁰ Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 192.

³¹ Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 193.

hopeless quest.”³² The religious vision, though aesthetically and emotionally ultimate, cannot be monopolized by the limited doctrines of any religion in particular. It can be said, however, that the rising or falling tide of each religious tradition through the ages depends upon the ability of its concepts, symbols, rituals, myths, architecture, and personae (etc.) to inspire worship in such a way that the intuition of God is called forth naturally from spiritual recesses deeper than can be rationally understood.³³ The psychology of modern civilization, from Whitehead’s point of view, has little patience for the traditional image of God as an omnipotent dictator. In this respect, such images are “fatal,” since “religion collapses unless its main positions command immediacy of assent.”³⁴

More often than any religious image per se, Deleuze’s target is the illusion of *transcendence* as such, which results whenever we “[interpret immanence] as immanent *to* Something.”³⁵ The illusion of transcendence resonates with 3 other illusions, or “thought mirages”: 1) *universality*, which results when the immanent phenomenon (or plane of immanence) is conceived as immanent “to” a concept, 2) *eternity*, which results when we forget that concepts must be created and are not waiting in the sky for thinkers to discover, and 3) *discursiveness*, which results when concepts are reduced to logical propositions.³⁶ These illusions become a thick fog obscuring the plane of immanence, condemning the philosophical and religious thinker alike to continually grasp after immanence as though it might be made immanent “to” something, whether it be “the great Object of contemplation [the neo-Platonic One], the Subject of reflection [the Kantian transcendental subject], or the Other subject of communication [the Husserlian intersubjective transcendental].”³⁷ The plane of immanence cannot itself be thought, since it provides the very condition for thought.³⁸ Whenever a thinker believes he has thought the plane, we can be sure he has only contemplated, reflected, or communicated an idol.

³² Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 191-192.

³³ Stengers, *Thinking With Whitehead*, 133.

³⁴ Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 191.

³⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 45.

³⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 49-50.

³⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 51.

³⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 37.

The pure immanence of the philosophical phenomenon can be likened to the friend, i.e., Wisdom, She who provides the condition for the possibility of philosophy.³⁹ The friend is the paradigmatic “conceptual persona” of philosophy. Conceptual personae, according to Deleuze, have a “somewhat mysterious...hazy existence halfway between concept and preconceptual plane, passing from one to the other.”⁴⁰ In the case of the friend, it must be asked what it could mean to become friendly if the friend had not once been, and could not become again, a stranger. On the philosophical phenomenon, the friend and the stranger, the thought and her thinker, never engage in *discussion* with one another. Discussion is useless to philosophy, since discussions about thinking can only mistake concepts for propositions, as if the former could be deliberately expressed in sentence form (the illusion of discursiveness).⁴¹ Once the discursive mirage has captured a thinker, thinking can only circle about itself in dialectical pursuit of a shallow truth extracted from the agonism of opinion.⁴² The best dialectics end in aporia (e.g., Plato’s aporiatic dialogues and Kant’s table of antinomies), or even better, in their own self-overcoming, or *Aufhebung*, whereby opposed opinions are swallowed up into the Circle of circles as necessary moments in the historical unfolding of the absolute Concept (e.g., Hegel). Deleuze is not a dialectical thinker, since he denies that any discussion of philosophical opinions might finally resolve itself in absolute identity. Real differences always remain unaccounted for. Further, there will always be a plurality of concepts, and concepts themselves are already multiplicities.⁴³ Hegel imagined that his dialectic had reached the end of philosophy, which is why he claimed no longer to be a philosopher, but to have become wise. But for Deleuze, the friend and the stranger remain necessary illusions for philosophy: philosophy, in other words, “requires this division of thought between [friend and stranger].”⁴⁴ The philosophical creator of concepts must remain divided against himself at the same time that he befriends the image of thought projected in the division. To cancel (*Aufheben*) this division would be to dissolve the necessary condition of thinking. The progress of philosophy depends upon a philosopher’s willingness to dwell within

³⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 3.

⁴⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 61.

⁴¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 22, 28.

⁴² Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 79.

⁴³ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 15.

⁴⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 69.

(without becoming immanent “to”) continual crises of agonism and reconciliation, meeting therein a proliferation of strange friends and friendly strangers. Deleuze writes:

It is as if the *struggle against chaos* does not take place without an affinity with the enemy, because another struggle develops and takes on more importance—the *struggle against opinion*, which claims to protect us from chaos itself.⁴⁵

To *dwell* in crisis is no easy task. But this is the task required of the modern thinker, especially if he is a Christian philosopher who has accepted the risk of thinking God’s immanence. To secularize the concept of God, as Whitehead and Deleuze demand, is to uncover “thought’s relationship with the earth,”⁴⁶ to dig up what has been buried beneath the foggy illusions of transcendence estranging humanity from its terrestrial home. To think with the earth is undoubtedly a creative act; but it is also a matter of recovery, or *resurrection*, and of uncovering, or *apocalypse*.⁴⁷

Christian philosophy’s paradigmatic conceptual persona is Christ, “the Word” who “became flesh and dwelt among us.”⁴⁸ At first blush, He may seem, like other conceptual personae, to possess a less than incarnate, hazy existence closer to the transcendence of the spirit/heaven than the immanence of the earthly plane. As John said, “The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it”⁴⁹—Traditional theology has all too often emphasized Christ’s transcendence, making Him more divine than human (and making humanity more sinful than redeemed).

Despite His initially ghostly outline, Christ’s ideality cannot be understood to be in any way *abstract*: He is rather an (the?) *intercessor*, the *seed* of a peculiarly Christian mode of thinking. “A particular conceptual persona,” writes Deleuze, “who perhaps did not exist before us, thinks in us.”⁵⁰ Of Christ it is said that He both was in the beginning before us and will be in the end after us. His omnipresence lays out a uniquely immanent image of thought based on *incarnation*. The

⁴⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 203.

⁴⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 69.

⁴⁷ These Christological concepts can be read in parallel to Deleuze and Guattari’s geophilosophical concepts of “reterritorialization” and “deterritorialization” (*What Is Philosophy?*, 69-70).

⁴⁸ John 1:14.

⁴⁹ John 1:5.

⁵⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 69.

Christian plane of immanence demands a creation of concepts whose central problematic, or spiritual ordeal, is *death*, and whose solution, should it be realized, is an earthly *resurrection*. The Christian phenomenon is unique because it is founded upon the birth, death, and resurrection of God on earth, which is to say it depends upon the possibility of the *becoming-immanent of transcendence itself*. Only then can the Christian thinker become inhabited by *living* thinking. “My old self,” writes Paul,

has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.⁵¹

Like the philosophical friend, Christ’s teachings can appear strange. “I tell you,” He said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”⁵² How can an earthly human being—normatively tied to family, friend, race, and nation—possibly live up to such an impossible, indeed *infinite*, demand? It is a demand that does violence to opinion and breaks with all commonsense. Nonetheless, this demand provides the peculiarly Christian problematic, an ordeal whose resolution requires *becoming-incarnate*, and thereby participating in bringing about an as yet unrealized providential plan(e), “on earth, as it is in heaven.”⁵³ This is the strangeness of the “Galilean origin” of Christianity mentioned by Whitehead. For those with eyes to see, it generated a religious imaginary in which the coercive power of a transcendent dictator was replaced by the persuasive love of a worldly advocate. While Whitehead did not believe it possible, or even desirable, to construct a doctrinal unity out of the world’s diversity of religions, he did believe

that it is possible, amid these differences, to reach a general agreement as to those elements, in intimate human experience and general history, which we select to exemplify that ultimate theme of the divine immanence, as a completion required by our cosmological outlook.⁵⁴

In other words, while humanity will certainly continue to disagree as to the particular qualitative aspects of religious facts and their proper moral interpretations, some coordination of these facts along a single plane of immanence may at least be attempted. Whitehead’s cosmological

⁵¹ Galations 2:20.

⁵² Matthew 5:44.

⁵³ Matthew 6:10.

⁵⁴ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1933/1961), 161.

candidate for the ultimate religious theme is Divine Eros. His philosophical intervention into traditional theology aimed to transform the transcendent God of “coercive forces wielding the thunder” into the creaturely God of persuasion, “which slowly and in quietness [operates] by love.”⁵⁵ Given humanity’s recently seized god-like powers of technology, sustaining our planetary civilization would seem to depend upon the realization of such a secular “earth ethos.” Our civilization is in dire need of a world-renewing metaphysical consensus regarding the divine nature. If we are unable to believe in the divinity of the world, our collective behavior runs the risk destroying that world. The spirit of religion, though it is from time to time “explained away, distorted, and buried,” has never once entirely left us, according to Whitehead, “since the travel of mankind towards civilization.”⁵⁶ Whenever religion takes flight from worldly concerns, it is the sure sign of a world nearing its end.

Whitehead traces the gradual realization of the concept of divine immanence through a “threefold revelation” stretching approximately twelve hundred years: 1) it begins in Athens with an intellectual innovation by Plato, 2) then passes into Jerusalem where the person of Jesus Christ exemplified the apocalyptic (ἀποκάλυψις- to “un-cover”) power of Plato’s concept, 3) and finally it culminates in a metaphysical interpretation of these events generated during the formative period of Christian theology.⁵⁷

Whitehead regularly praises Plato’s depth of intuition. Just as often, he admits Plato’s failure to achieve a coherent overall statement of his conceptual scheme: “the greatest metaphysician, the poorest systematic thinker.”⁵⁸ It is for one concept in particular, though, that Whitehead was led to crown Plato “the wisest of men”: the idea that

the divine persuasion [Eros] is the foundation of the order of the world, but that it could only produce such a measure of harmony as amid brute forces [Chaos] it was possible to accomplish.⁵⁹

It was this idea, conceived in principle by Plato, that the person of Jesus Christ was to reveal in actual deed. Though the historical records of His life are scattered and inconsistent, “there can

⁵⁵ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 166; *Process and Reality*, 343.

⁵⁶ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 172.

⁵⁷ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 166.

⁵⁸ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 166.

⁵⁹ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 160.

be no doubt,” writes Whitehead, “as to what elements...have evoked a response from all that is best in human nature”:

The Mother, the Child, and the bare manger: the lowly man, homeless and self-forgetful, with his message of peace, love, and sympathy: the suffering, the agony, the tender words as life ebbed, the final despair: and the whole with the authority of supreme victory.⁶⁰

Finally, it was the early Church fathers who made the first sustained effort to grope towards a coherent account of God’s persuasive agency in the world.⁶¹ The major fruit of their labor was the doctrine of the Trinity (the mutual immanence of the theos-anthropos-cosmos); more specifically, their most important contribution was the direct statement of the divine immanence in the world in the third person of the Trinity. Unfortunately, despite this theological statement, the Church fathers failed to attain adequate metaphysical generality because they still exempted an infinite God from the categories applicable to the finite actual occasions involved in the becoming of the spatiotemporal world.⁶² Like Plato in many of his written dialogues, they were unable to disavow the notion of a derivative physical world poorly imitating the Ideas eternally realized in the mind of a disincarnate God.

Deleuze’s work has been read as an attempt to “overturn” Plato.⁶³ In any attempt to “overturn” Plato it should be remembered that little more is required than continuing to “turn over” Plato—as in continuing to turn over the pages of his dialogues to be reminded that, like Whitman, he is large and contains multitudes.⁶⁴ As Emerson put it:

the acutest searcher, the lovingest disciple could never tell what Platonism was; indeed admirable texts can be quoted on both sides of every great question, from him.⁶⁵

Plato was equal parts poet and philosopher. He wrote *dialogues*, always leaving the *doctrines* for his characters. His meaning is never on the surface, even when it comes from the face of Socrates. Reading him, like reading the metaphysical experiments of Whitehead or Deleuze, is an infinite interpretive activity. For Whitehead, the entire history of European philosophy can be safely

⁶⁰ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 167.

⁶¹ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 167-169.

⁶² Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 169.

⁶³ Ramey, *The Hermetic Deleuze*, Ch. 4: “The Overturning of Platonism,” 112cf.

⁶⁴ See Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” section 51.

⁶⁵ Journal entry, Oct. 1845.

characterized as “a series of footnotes to Plato.”⁶⁶ This despite the fact that Plato himself tells us in a letter to Dion that “no man of intelligence will venture to express his philosophical views in language.” “[Setting] down [one's views] in written characters” is especially denounced.⁶⁷ Written words lay in their parchment graves, still, silent, dead. The reader's questions and disputations receive no reply.

On the testimony of Aristotle, Plotinus, and Proclus, we know that Plato's unwritten secret teaching had something to do with the way that

ideas themselves were composed of matter, *hyle*, or in other words of an indefinite multiplicity, *duas aoristos*, which has as its elements the great and the small, and as its form, unity, *to hen*.⁶⁸

If this is indeed the secret teaching, then how strangely inverted is the traditional European reading of Plato!

Deleuze's reading destroys the Platonic two-world theory of perfect Ideas poorly copied by sensory images, but he is allured by Plato's alternative conception of pure Difference. Where Aristotle reduces difference to that derived from the commonsense comparison of similars, understanding Plato requires risking the sanity of one's mind in pursuit of the dark, difficult, and dangerous Idea of Difference in itself. For Plato, individuals are not constituted by their substantial forms, or by their special determinations of a genus, as they are for Aristotle; nor is knowledge of individuals constituted by generalizations from a series. Rather, Plato's is an ontology of singularity, where knowing an individual (be it ideal or actual) requires directly intuiting its uniquely authentic line of descent, rather than representing, identifying, or abstracting its general form. As Ramey puts it, “Knowledge is not a matter of generalization but of participation.” He continues:

The claim to participation is not simply the claim to be identified as a member of a class or token of a type. It is a claim to have passed a test or to have a basis for one's claim. The difference between the just and the unjust, pretenders to justice and authentic stewards of justice, is not a difference between any two, but an internal and constitutive difference. It

⁶⁶ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 39.

⁶⁷ Ironically, of course, as Plato was himself a prolific author.

⁶⁸ Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2006), 56n8.

is the difference an ‘immediate fact’ of participation makes...It is the selection of an icon from within a prodigious field of idols, false images.⁶⁹

The difference is *initiatory*, “acquired by each person on their own account.”⁷⁰ That is, it has to do with undertaking the descent into the chaos of the underworld and returning to tell the tale. Philosophy without initiation would quickly turn stale and become abstract. Without stories to perform on infinite planes stretching beyond the relative horizons of commonsense experience, a philosopher’s concepts cannot catch fire and acquire the persuasive agency of personality. In the difficult Ideas one partakes of are discovered signs of their ingression into the light of physical appearance: after the Christian-Platonic initiation, the world is transfigured into a problematic network of occult icons whose meaning can only be uncovered intuitively by the mental magic of talismanic thinking. Ideas are traced into appearances as signs, moments of discontinuity in extensive physical space-time out of which the intensive oddity of self-reference emerges.⁷¹ These recursive oddities unfold themselves into the physical plane, erupting as problematic forces requiring of the flesh-hewn mind not new representations of a supposedly extra-bodily world, but self-immolation through constant death and resurrection. Thinking is an ecstatic, violent act, always killing the neurons which support it, “making the brain a set of little deaths that puts constant death within us.”⁷²

Deleuze’s Plato creates concepts not only iconically, but ironically, in that he never claims to represent an idea as true, but only to participate in an idea as “a way of problematizing, a manner of posing questions.”⁷³ Deleuze pushes his Platonism as far away from any two-world caricature as possible by positing, according to Ramey,

⁶⁹ Ramey, *The Hermetic Deleuze*, 118.

⁷⁰ Deleuze, “Mathesis, Science, and Philosophy,” foreword to Johann Malfatti de Montereggio, *Mathesis, Or Studies on the Anarchy and Hierarchy of Knowledge* (Paris: Editions Du Griffon D’Or, 1946), 147.

⁷¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 21-22.

⁷² Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 216; Curiously, Christian esotericist Rudolf Steiner says almost the same thing: “The chief characteristic of ordinary thinking is that each single act of thinking injures the nervous system, and above all, the brain; it destroys something in the brain. Every thought means that a minute process of destruction takes place in the cells of the brain. For this reason sleep is necessary for us, in order that this process of destruction may be made good; during sleep we restore what during the day was destroyed in our nervous system by thinking. What we are consciously aware of in an ordinary thought is in reality the process of destruction that is taking place in our nervous system” (Lecture: 1st May, 1913; <http://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/OccSciOccDev/19130501p01.html> [accessed 12/16/2012]).

⁷³ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 121.

the genesis of mind in direct encounters with imperceptible forces of perception, moments when the subtle and elusive patterns of difference and repetition animating life force the mind to interpret and even to create.⁷⁴

Whitehead's and Deleuze's immanent reading of Christianity, along with their reading of Plato's participatory doctrines of Persuasion and Difference, provides a world-renewing medicinal brew sorely needed in the contemporary world. Deleuze writes of the "medicinal thought" of a people to come who, according Ramey,

would, at an eschatological limit, have passed beyond the segmentation of knowledge in art, science, and philosophy in some as-yet-unrealized integral life of knowledge, such as that long dreamt of in the esoteric tradition of *mathesis universalis*.⁷⁵

For Deleuze, mathesis is "a thinking of incarnation and individuality,"⁷⁶ a form of symbolic knowing that allows for the discovery (and creation) of life's (and death's) deepest secrets. Knowledge of life's individuating tendency, its power to repeatedly differ from itself, reveals how "the whole [can symbolize] itself in each individual."⁷⁷ Initiation into such knowledge would not only empower individual decision and action, but could rejuvenate the social and political life of civilization. We await the people to come who will be capable of completing creation through the incarnation of this Christogenic "body without organs."⁷⁸ "If you want to make a new start in religion," writes Whitehead, "you must be content to wait a thousand years."⁷⁹

Bibliography

- 🎧 Deleuze, Gilles. "Mathesis, Science, and Philosophy," foreword to Johann Malfatti de Montereaggio, *Mathesis, Or Studies on the Anarchy and Hierarchy of Knowledge* (Paris: Editions Du Griffon D'Or, 1946).
- 🎧 Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
- 🎧 Deleuze, Gilles *Difference and Repetition*, transl. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 1994/2004).
- 🎧 Deleuze, Gilles. *The Logic of Sense* (London: Continuum, 1990/2004).
- 🎧 Grant, Iain Hamilton. *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2006).

⁷⁴ Ramey, *The Hermetic Deleuze*, 125.

⁷⁵ Ramey, *The Hermetic Deleuze*, 89.

⁷⁶ Deleuze, "Mathesis, Science, and Philosophy," 143.

⁷⁷ Ramey, *The Hermetic Deleuze*, 98.

⁷⁸ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (London: Continuum, 1990/2004), 102; see also Ramey's discussion of Cusa's anthropocosmic Christology (*The Hermetic Deleuze*, 236n29).

⁷⁹ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 172.

- 📖 Hallward, Peter. *Out of this World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* (London: Verso Books, 2006).
- 📖 Ramey, Joshua. *The Hermetic Deleuze: Philosophy and Spiritual Ordeal* (London: Duke University Press, 2012).
- 📖 Stengers, Isabelle. *Thinking With Whitehead* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). Whitehead, A. N. *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925/1960).
- 📖 Whitehead, A. N. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Free Press, 1929/1978).
- 📖 Whitehead, A. N. *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1933/1961).
- 📖 Whitehead, A. N. *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1938/1968).