

PAUL REDDING'S *CONTINENTAL IDEALISM* (AND DELEUZE'S CONTINUATION OF THE IDEALIST TRADITION)

Sean Bowden

I came to Paul Redding's 2009 work, *Continental Idealism: Leibniz to Nietzsche*, by a slightly circuitous route.¹ In fact, it was in response to a problem I encountered while working on Gilles Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense*. The problem was this: I found myself treating Deleuze as an idealist, which struck me as odd, since Deleuze is normally thought of as an empiricist, a vitalist, or even a materialist. So I turned to Redding's recently published work as a means of clarifying my understanding of idealism, and to sort out the nature of some of the claims I wanted to make with respect to Deleuze. In what follows, I will outline several of what appear to me to be Redding's major claims in *Continental Idealism*. I will then summarize the way in which Deleuze can be thought of as an idealist, in Redding's sense.

In helping myself to understand Deleuze's apparent idealism, I had two reasons for turning to Professor Redding's work. First of all, having been fortunate enough to be one of his undergraduate students at the University of Sydney, I was well aware of both his impeccable scholarship and the exemplary clarity of his work. Secondly, Redding traces the history of continental idealism back to Leibniz, and Leibniz, I believe, is one of the major sources of Deleuze's own brand of idealism.²

However, once I began to engage with *Continental Idealism*, I also became aware of a third advantage I could draw from this work. This concerns the way in which *Continental Idealism* fits into Redding's larger project of establishing a relation between the history of idealism and contemporary Anglo-American philosophy.³ Indeed, Redding's account of this relation seemed to me to parallel the one I was just beginning to see, and hope to pursue in the future, between Deleuze's early work and the work of neo-pragmatists such as Donald Davidson, Richard Rorty and Robert Brandom.

As Redding notes elsewhere, Robert Brandom argues that his approach to semantics has roots in the tradition of Kant and Hegel. But now, as Redding observes, if "this claim is true it casts the relation of analytic philosophy to the idealist tradition in a whole new light, and to understand how it *could* be true would require considerable re-writing of the standard accounts of both idealism and analytic philosophy."⁴ It appears, then,

PAUL REDDING'S *CONTINENTAL IDEALISM*

that *Continental Idealism* is, at least in part, precisely this attempt to re-write the history of idealism in such a way that its compatibility with certain aspects of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy can be brought out. In particular, it seems to me that Redding emphasises two major points in this regard.

First of all, continental idealism is characterized by objective idealism (or idealism about form) as opposed to subjective idealism (or idealism about matter).⁵ Now, it is crucial to Redding's project to make this distinction between objective and subjective idealism. For if it is the case that Analytic philosophy began with Russell's and Moore's explicit rejection of "British idealism," this British idealism should not be confused, as it often is, with Kant's "transcendental idealism," or with the objective and absolute idealisms of post-Kantian philosophers such as Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. Indeed, it appears that what Russell and Moore identified and rejected as idealism has more in common with Bishop Berkeley's "immaterialism" than it does with the tradition of German idealism analysed by Redding.

In fact, following Redding, continental idealism finds its real origin in the philosophy of Leibniz and not Berkeley. Berkeley, of course, was a subjective idealist and an idealist about matter. He reduced matter to ideas subjectively conceived, and made these depend in turn on the mind of God as the ultimate underlying reality or substance. External reality, for Berkeley, is only the inside of the divine mind. And this is why Redding argues that Berkeley is best described as a "spiritual realist" rather than an idealist.⁶

Leibniz, on the contrary, was a realist about matter, but an idealist about the spatio-temporal form of material "objects."⁷ With regard to matter, Leibniz made two claims. The first claim is that there is no matter which is not the body of some soul or mind, that is to say, of extensionless "monads," which are internally characterized by their changing perceptions or representations of bodies. The second claim is that there are monads "everywhere" in matter, all of whose perceptions are held in divinely ordained and harmonious relations.⁸ With regard to the spatio-temporal form of material bodies, then, Leibniz argued that the very ideas of space and time were mere *abstractions* from the relations of coexistence or succession between the representations making up the contents of particular minds or monads, which is to say that spatio-temporal form is ideal.⁹ But all technical details aside, what is important to note here is that the very different approaches of Berkeley and Leibniz to matter and form mark a crucial distinction which should not be obscured. Indeed, for Redding, the idealist tradition from Kant to Hegel, despite its varied developments, is essentially characterized by an opposition to the kind of Berkeleyian "immaterialism" rejected by Moore and Russell, and by a commitment only to the ideality or mind-dependence of the *form* of the representation of objects, a commitment first found in Leibniz.

The second point which Redding makes in order to bring idealism closer to contemporary Anglo-American philosophy is that the brand of idealism which finds its source in Kantian philosophy must be understood as "strong transcendental idealism," as opposed to the "weak transcendental idealism" which we find in standard readings of Kant in Anglo-American philosophy. In other words, instead of treating Kant as a sceptic with respect to the project of metaphysics thought of as a knowledge of "things-in-themselves" (this is weak transcendental idealism), Kant must be understood as conceiving of metaphysics as a science of what reason produces out of its own activity.¹⁰ In other words, following Redding, for Kant, the objects of traditional metaphysics are mind-dependent: whilst they are not *known* as such, they are *understood* from the point of view of pure, conceptually articulated thought. And as such, as Ideas of reason, these "objects" have an essential role to play in practical reason. In short, from the point of view of strong transcendental idealism, metaphysics, for Kant, is reconceived from within a *practical* point of view.

There are two consequences of understanding Kant in this way. First of all, it allows us to correctly understand the relation of post-Kantian philosophy to Kant. For, following Redding's detailed analyses, the development of idealism is precisely a development of Kant's program of strong transcendental idealism. But secondly, if I understand Professor Redding's larger project correctly, it allows us to relate the tradition of continental idealism as a whole to certain developments in Anglo-American philosophy. Indeed, as Redding notes in the "Postscript" to his *Continental Idealism*, but also elsewhere, a number of debates and developments in contemporary analytic

philosophy turn, quite precisely, on the question of the relation between, and even inseparability of, theoretical and practical reason, or again, on the question of the intersubjective and normative ground of the relation between representations and the objects represented.¹¹

But quite apart from this attempt to read the history of continental idealism in such a way as to underscore its compatibility with contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, Redding's 2009 publication can be read in its entirety as a book *about* continental idealism. On the one hand, it is an extremely clear and attentive reconstruction of the history of idealism. On the other hand, from one representative of continental idealism to another, Redding demonstrates the persistence of certain structural features by means of which we can recognize continental idealism. These features of idealism include: the affirmation of the "ideality" of spatio-temporal and conceptual "form"; a conception of the "perspectival" nature of perceptual knowledge; a certain "rational reconciliationism" of conflicting stances or orientations towards the world; the assertion of idealism over perceptual realism; a prioritizing of concepts and inferences over sense experience; and a holistic and organicist view of knowledge and the cosmos.¹²

In fact, as I mentioned at the outset, it was just these structural features of continental idealism which helped me clarify the way in which I was beginning to understand Deleuze, in his *The Logic of Sense*, as an idealist. Deleuze's idealism in this text, it appears to me, can be summarized in four points.

First of all, it must be said that Deleuze's idealism in *The Logic of Sense* is part and parcel of his philosophy of events. In this text, Deleuze argues that events are what determine "things" in general, that is, worldly individuals, persons and general concepts. Relations between events or processes make the "thing" what it is, whatever it is. As human beings, we talk about events using language. We come to know things through the way we combine and order their constitutive events. We try to discover law-like relations between events, and we develop concepts which spell out what structure or combination of events must characterize a particular thing in order for it to be a thing of a certain general type.¹³

The second point to be made is that this process of combining and ordering events is itself an ongoing event which is coextensive with the working of what Deleuze calls a "problem" or "problematic Idea." Such a problem is best described as a complex and shifting "virtual" structure of relations between events, wherein events at different levels and of different types are said to determine each other to determine things in general, and without reference to some given substance which could fix this structure from the outside. Now, what is important here is that the problematic Idea also has an essential relation to our linguistic practices. As Deleuze argues, his concept of the problematic Idea establishes the conditions under which the relation between the sense and the truth of a proposition bearing on events, along with the event-determined object which realizes this truth, can be *internally* generated within sense itself. For Deleuze, every true denoting proposition expresses a sense, but this sense will itself be determined in relation to a problematic Idea for which related series of true propositions will collectively function as elements of response or cases of solution.¹⁴

The third point to be made with regard to Deleuze's idealism is that the virtual relations between events which are constitutive of problematic Ideas are determined or "actualized" in practice in an intersubjective context. This actualization gives rise to event-determined individuals, persons and general concepts. Initially, individuals and persons are held to be determined within a common world insofar as there is a convergent or law-like relation between the particular events which can be truly predicated of them. But what is more, insofar as one person's point of view may always diverge from another's with regard to the events making up a world, a knowledge of worldly individuals must ultimately depend on what Deleuze calls a "disjunctive synthesis" of these divergent points of view. This synthesis, however, will only be able to be carried out under two conditions: on the one hand, relations between the particular events characterizing worldly individuals must be determined; and, on the other hand, these relations must come to be embodied in shared concepts of increasing and decreasing generality, which worldly individuals will be said to exemplify, precisely insofar as they are individuals belonging to the same world.¹⁵

Finally, to say that events are combined and ordered in an intersubjective and linguistic context is not to say that events are ultimately reducible to a pre-given language or conceptual scheme, or to a transcendental subject understood as ultimately determinant. Rather, for Deleuze, both language and the subject are themselves event-determined things within the problematic Idea. In short, the subject comes to be identified, and to identify itself, as being caught up in the process of combining and ordering events in intersubjective discourse, only insofar as the events which characterize it in its social, psychological and linguistic relations can be determined to be of a socially appropriate type. And language is determined by the way in which the speech-events of this subject, come both to make sense of, and be made sense of by, the speech-events of all the other subjects implicated in the concrete actualization of the virtual relations constitutive of the problematic Idea.¹⁶

In this way, then, Deleuze's problematic Idea is not only constituted by relations between series of events of different orders (physical, biological, social, psychological, linguistic, etc.), it is also the "evental-determination" of those events making up the "lives" of things in general. It is the event which we human-beings collectively bring about in discourse, but also the event which ultimately determines us as the corporeal, social, speaking and knowing "things" we are.

In line with several of Professor Redding's structural features of idealism, therefore, it can be seen that Deleuze argues for the *ideality* of spatio-temporal and conceptual form, that is, in terms of the actualization of virtual problematic *Ideas*. It can also be seen how Deleuze argues for the *perspectival nature of perceptual knowledge*, that is, insofar as the determination of knowledge and the known is a matter of "disjunctive syntheses" or "points of view on other (divergent) points of view." Thirdly, it can be seen that Deleuze prioritizes ideal *sense* over any direct or naïve perceptual realism. And finally, it can be seen how Deleuze argues for a *holistic* view of knowledge and the cosmos. Indeed, for Deleuze, in the absence of any *given* substance to which the play of events can be reduced, we must think the unity of all the events which constitute us and our world entirely *within* the problematic Idea.

It is in light of these features of his philosophy, then, that I understand Deleuze, unfashionably perhaps, as an idealist in Redding's sense, and as continuing in his own way the tradition of continental idealism.

SEAN BOWDEN is a Research Fellow in the Philosophy Program at La Trobe University. He is the author of *The Priority of Events: Deleuze's Logic of Sense* (Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming) and the co-editor of *Badiou and Philosophy* (Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).

NOTES

1. Paul Redding, *Continental Idealism: Leibniz to Nietzsche*. London and New York: Routledge, 2009.
2. I examine Deleuze's relation to Leibniz in *The Logic of Sense*, in "Deleuze's Neo-Leibnizianism, Events and *The Logic of Sense*'s 'Static Ontological Genesis'" *Deleuze Studies* (forthcoming).
3. See, for example, Paul Redding, *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; "The Possibility of German Idealism after Analytic Philosophy: McDowell, Brandom and Beyond" *Postanalytic and Metacontinental: Crossing Philosophical Divides*. Eds Jack Reynolds, Ed Mares, James Williams and James Chase. London: Continuum, 2010.
4. Paul Redding, "Idealism: a Love (of Sophia) that Dare not Speak its Name" *Arts: The Journal of the Sydney University Arts Association* 29 (2007), 72.
5. Redding, *Continental Idealism*, 2.
6. Redding, *Continental Idealism*, 17.
7. Redding follows the work of Daniel Garber and Justin Smith on this point. See Redding, *Continental Idealism*, 182.
8. See, for example, G.W. Leibniz, "The Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason" *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*. Trans. and Ed. Leroy E. Loemker. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969, §§1-4.
9. The most complete discussion of this point is to be found in the Leibniz-Clarke correspondence. See "The Controversy between Leibniz and Clarke, 1715-1716" *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*. Trans. and Ed. Leroy E. Loemker. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969, 675-721.
10. Redding, *Continental Idealism*, 46-47.
11. See Redding, *Continental Idealism*, 175-179. See, more generally, Redding, *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought* and "The Possibility of German Idealism after Analytic Philosophy."
12. See Redding, *Continental Idealism*, 3-5.
13. On this, see Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*. Trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale. Ed. Constantin V. Boundas. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, 109-120.
14. See Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 50-57 and 120-123.
15. With particular reference to the concept of the "person" as an "object = x," see Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 109-120 and 171-178. I examine a number of these points in detail in "Deleuze's Neo-Leibnizianism".
16. Deleuze develops these points in a vocabulary derived from Freud, Klein and Lacan. See generally, *The Logic of Sense*, 186-249.