

PHI 600: Levinas and Deleuze: Transcendence and Immanence
Syracuse University - Dr. John D. Caputo - Fall, 2007

Prospectus

Does transcendence mean the search for a world beyond this one or is there some sense in which there is a transcendence of or in this world which is not a transcendence beyond the world? By the same token, does immanence always mean we are “trapped” in the world or does it represent its own kind of surpassal, splendor or glory? If so, what then is the difference between transcendence and immanence? What difference, ethically or politically, would it make to be the champion of one or the other? We will pursue these questions by way of two distinguished 20th century continental philosophers: Emmanuel Levinas (1906-95), whose entire work may be described as a search for transcendence, and Gilles Deleuze (1925-95), who is a famous advocate of the “plane of immanence.”

Levinas. The word “transcendence” can mean transcending the subject in order to get to the object, or transcending the self in order to reach the other, or transcending inner-worldly things to reach the horizon of the world itself, or transcending the sensible world in order to attain the supersensible one, or transcending beings to reach Being, or transcending Being in order to make one’s way to what is beyond or without or otherwise than being, which is how Levinas put it. But Levinas’s view is interesting in this regard. While a famous advocate of transcendence, Levinas denounced the fantasy of a “world behind the scenes,” a “*Hinterwelt*” of which he was as uncompromising a detractor as was Nietzsche himself. Another world, life after death, some higher supersensible being beyond sensible beings—those are all so many fantasies “trapped within being,” dreams of replacing this world with another one, hoping to exchange a worldly kingdom for celestial one with the coin of “meritorious works,” which is the celestial narcissism of Kierkegaard’s ultra-eudaemonistic search for eternal happiness that Levinas dislikes. By transcendence Levinas meant a strictly *ethical* transcendence, a transcendence of self and narcissism, more temporal than spatial. Even the name of God boils down without remainder into our being turned to the neighbor, *tout court*. What then is accomplished by ethical trans(a)cendence to the other? In one very definite sense, nothing. Ethics is not *for* something; it is a non-profit enterprise. Ethics is all the transcendence there is. It does not buy us a ticket somewhere else. There is nowhere else to go. Be good, rise up in ethical splendor (ethical transcendence), and then you die.

Deleuze. For Deleuze, “transcendence” is the cardinal sin of philosophy. The point of philosophy should be the affirmation of sheer becoming, of the “plane of immanence.” When we say “it’s raining” do not be seduced by grammar into positing some “it” that is the subject of the action; do not separate the doer from the deed. To adhere rigorously to the plane of immanence thus is to affirm the “univocity of being” (Scotus) as a play of differences (Nietzsche) of infinitely varying intensities, of surfaces without depth. Philosophy must avoid the illusion of positing some transcendent point beneath difference that stabilizes becoming, like a substance, or some point above difference which imposes difference upon some indifferent substrate below, like God, or that produces differences as mental constructs, as in epistemological representationalism, or as systemic effects of the opposing signifiers, as in structuralism. Those are just so many variations on the idea of the stabilizing, theological center declared dead by Nietzsche. Becoming demands not transcendent explanations, like God or mind, but transcendental ones, cultivated immanently from within the “events” or differences

themselves, of which, as he says in the *Logic of Sense*, we should “make ourselves worthy.” We should enjoy the play of simulacra that animate language and give our lives a buzz or glow.

Texts

- Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape* (Stanford University Press, paper, 2003)
_____. *Time and the Other* (Duquesne Univ Press, paper) ISBN 0-8207-0233-1
_____. *Totality and Infinity* (Duquesne Univ Press, paper) ISBN 0-8207-0245-5
Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (Columbia Univ Press, paper)
 Pure Immanence (Stanford University Press, paper, 2003)
_____ and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (Columbia Univ Press, paper)

Course Requirements

- (1) Seminar Participation (20%)
- (2) 2 Research Papers (40% each) (4,000-4,500 words each):

Paper #1: Levinas

You may take up any of the texts or issues taken up in class or look into Levinas's other works if you prefer.

Oct. 3. Statement of topic

Oct. 31 Paper due

Paper #2:

You may take up any of the texts or issues taken up in class or look into Deleuze's other works if you prefer. Deleuze is especially open to comparative studies since he makes such fertile adaptations of people like Leibniz, Spinoza, Hume and Bergson.

Nov. 14 Statement of topic

Dec. 14 Paper due

Reserve Room

I have put the following books on reserve for you:

An excellent general introduction to Levinas is Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993); and the interviews with Levinas in *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ Press, 1985).

For starters on Deleuze, try Todd May, *Gilles Deleuze: An Introduction* (Cambridge, 1999) and also Clare Colebrook, *Understanding Deleuze* (London: Allen & Unwin, 2002). For a helpful and slightly analytic commentary on D&R see James Williams, *Gilles Deleuze's "Difference and Repetition"* (Edinburgh UP, 2003) and another commentary with a Bergsonian twist, Keith Ansell Pearson, *Germinal Life: The Difference and Repetition of Gilles Deleuze* (Routledge, 1999). More advanced readers try the work of Constantine Boundas. Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Splendor of Being*, is good but difficult

Several works on transcendence in continental philosophy have recently appeared (all from Indiana UP):

James E. Falconer, *Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion*

Transcendence and Beyond, eds, John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon

Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*

Office Hours (HL 506)

I have scheduled office hours—Tuesday, 3:45-5:30, Wednesday, 1:00-4:15—but you should, for safety's sake, make an appt in advance by email at johncaputo@comcast.net.

Syllabus

August 29	Orientation; Levinas, <i>On Escape</i> (pp. 49-74)
September 5	Levinas, <i>Time and the Other</i> (pp. 39-94)
12	Levinas, <i>Totality and Infinity</i> , Introduction, Preface, Section I: A & B (pp. 21-81)
19	_____. Section I: C & D; Section II: A & B (pp. 82-121)
26	_____. Section II: C, D & E (pp. 121-183)
October 3	_____. Section III (pp. 184-246)
10	_____. Section IV (pp. 248 to end)
17	Gilles Deleuze, <i>Difference and Repetition</i> , Prefaces (xv-xxii) Ch. I (pp. 1-69)
24	_____. Ch. II (pp. 70-128) & <i>Pure Immanence</i> , Ch. III (Nietzsche)
31	_____. Ch. III (pp. 129-168)
November 7	_____. Chs. IV (pp. 169-22) & <i>Pure Immanence</i> , Ch. II (Hume)
14	_____. Ch. V & Conclusion (pp. 223-305)
21	Thanksgiving
28	Deleuze and Guattari, <i>What is Philosophy?</i> , Part One (pp. 1-113) & <i>Pure Immanence</i> , Ch. I (Immanence: A Life)
December 4	Part Two (pp. 115 to end)