

**Between Natural Stupor
and the Thought of Stupefaction:
On Gilles Deleuze's Transcendental Stupidity**

Andrew Pollhammer

A Major Research Paper in the
Department of Philosophy

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Philosophy) at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

August 2017

© Andrew Pollhammer, 2017

Abstract: In this essay I offer an exegetical account of Deleuze's notion of "transcendental stupidity." I show how Deleuze's notion of transcendental stupidity concerns a fundamental inability on the part of human representational cognition to think difference conceptually. However, it is this very same inability to think difference by way of concepts that is at once representational cognition's "greatest powerlessness" (to think difference) and its "highest power" since it is through the use of concepts that (at least for Deleuze's transcendental philosophy) the maximal thinking of difference is possible, to the extent that concepts are pushed to the limit of what they can achieve toward this end. In the first section of this paper I provide a brief overview of some of the extant literature on the topic of Deleuze's transcendental stupidity. I show here that while a fair amount has been written on the topic of transcendental stupidity more work is needed with regard to explaining some of Deleuze's obscure statements on this notion in his magnum opus *Difference and Repetition*. Wirth (2015) and Posteraro (2016) offer insightful accounts of the influence of FWJ Schelling on Deleuze's notion of transcendental stupidity, but both commentators emphasize the negative aspects of stupidity as a deleterious reality that has befallen human cognition. In contrast to these accounts, I will emphasize throughout this Major Research Paper the degree to which transcendental stupidity is very much a positive notion, precisely to the extent to which it is what allows for what Deleuze calls the "highest power" of thought (when pushed to the limit of its powers). In the second section of this paper I offer an account of the origins of the "problem of stupidity" in Deleuze's work so as provide the reasons for why Deleuze wished to conceptualize a *de jure* transcendental (rather than empirical or *de facto*) stupidity in the first place. In the third section I will provide an explanatory account of transcendental stupidity by showing how it concerns a fundamental inability on the part of representational cognition to think difference (which Deleuze also calls an intensive groundlessness); however, it is this same fundamental inability which proves to be thought's highest power toward the end of thinking difference. I will show that thought oscillates between a tendency toward ipseity (which I, following Deleuze, call thought's "natural stupor" or "territorialization") and a tendency toward differentiation or deterritorialization (the maximal limit of which I refer to as the "thought of stupefaction," and which Deleuze refers to as "stupefied moments" of thought's encounter with the sublime). Transcendental stupidity concerns this oscillation in the specific mode of human representational cognition.

*And at last dwelling within the youthful power of thought,
through which nature recreates itself from nought,
as one power, one pulse, one life,
restriction and expansion's one continual strife.*

—F.W.J. Schelling¹

*... one fluctuates between absolute comprehension
and absolute incomprehension ...*

—Friedrich Schlegel²

... the mechanism of stupidity is the highest finality of thought.

—Gilles Deleuze³

There are a few recurrent problems in Gilles Deleuze's corpus which arise so frequently in his work that they take on the status of a *ritornello* or refrain. In fact, it would not be an overstatement to say that the entirety of Deleuze's oeuvre consists of so many refrains of problems intermingling and resonating with one another in contrapuntal series. With each refrain of a given problem, the problem itself undergoes inflections and modulations which affect the consistency of its conceptual coordinates, thereby altering the internal milieu—the nexus of terms, concepts, and relations—of which the problem consists. These modulations effect variations on the complex theme that is the problem itself.

It is sometimes the case that a modulation will affect a problem so dramatically that the problem is scarcely recognizable between Deleuze's texts, or even between passages within a single text. For the reader of Deleuze's works, it can seem as if everything important has happened between strange intermezzi of imperceptible frequencies, which can cause a reader to lose their bearings when attempting to figure out just what is going on with a given problem. When reading Deleuze one is often left wondering *what just happened? How am I to make sense of this problem now?* In the midst of these disorienting intermezzi, one can feel as if they are confronted with a sea of white noise, as they struggle to detect a signal of any refrain they may be familiar with. It is for this reason that the reader of Deleuze's works must above all undergo an apprenticeship of patient ear training, so as to become sensitive to the refrains.

Such a becoming-sensitive might allow one to learn to make sense of things, or better: allow some sense to arise out of the confrontation with what might at first appear to be

impenetrable non-sense. My aim in the present paper is to offer explanatory remarks on just one of Deleuze's problems, with the goal of aiding readers to detect a few signals in what might otherwise have been encountered as white noise or non-sense. The problem that I will be concerned with here is what Deleuze calls "the problem of stupidity." He offers elliptical and obscure remarks on the notion of "transcendental stupidity" in his 1968 magnum opus *Difference and Repetition*, in the third chapter, "The Image of Thought." I will explain the significance of the problem by offering an exegetical examination of this notion.

It is immediately important to point out that the obscure way in which the problem is explicated in *Difference and Repetition* is in no way fortuitous, since for Deleuze the *manner* in which a problem is discussed is of equal or greater importance than the 'content' or 'meaning' of the problem; and the problem of stupidity is intended to quite literally *stupefy* readers: to shock the habits of comprehension into a forced encounter with something *other* than the immediately recognizable. Since readers encountering this problem for the first time may therefore find it difficult to discern precisely what Deleuze intends to convey with this idea of transcendental stupidity, my aim here is to explain some of the most important conceptual mechanics of this notion. I will do this by showing how Deleuze's notion of transcendental stupidity draws much of its inspiration from certain ideas found in the *Naturphilosophie* of F.W.J. Schelling.

I will show that Deleuze's notion of transcendental stupidity concerns the relation by which Nature⁴, in the particular finite mode of human representational⁵ cognition, strives to think its own infinitely affirmative, intensive/differential genetic conditions, but is constitutively unable to do so otherwise than in a way which objectifies those intensive/differential relations into discrete concepts, terms and identities. Deleuze follows Schelling in describing this relation of Nature's finite empirical manifestations—its images or presentations (*Darstellungen*) of

‘itself’ *qua* beings—to its infinitely intensive/differential relations as an oscillating movement of contraction and expansion, where “contraction” denotes the movement of Nature toward egoistic enclosure (or ipseity), and “expansion” denotes the movement of self-othering or differentiating.

For Deleuze, the movement by which human representational cognition strives toward thinking the intensive/differential conditions of its genesis, begins from a state wherein an intensive preponderance of egoistic and reflective (representational) kind of thinking reigns and then intensively progresses (*if* it can, and to the extent that it can) toward thinking the differential/intensive conditions of its own genesis before confronting the limit of its capacities toward this end. Deleuze’s transcendental stupidity concerns the constitutive inability on the part of representational cognition to think the intensive/differential conditions of its genesis representationally; but it is this very inability to think intensive difference at the representational level that allows for the potentiality that the transcendental philosopher might yet come to think difference: to think *otherwise* (than representationally) by pushing representational cognition to the limit of what it can do. Here it seems requisite to offer remarks on how I am using the term “difference” and why Deleuze sees difference as constitutive of identity (rather than the other way around).

Traditionally, difference is conceived of as secondary to identity, which latter would comprise the ground by way of which things could be said to differ *from* one another. For example, in Aristotle’s taxonomies of being, the identity of the genus comprises the ground by way of which species under that genus can be said to differ *from* one another by virtue of their *differentiae*. In contrast to this tradition, Deleuze establishes a philosophy in which difference is the transcendental ground—a “groundless ground” as I will later show—by way of which “surface effects” of identity are engendered (DR 117). Deleuze’s philosophy of difference is

grounded in a certain metaphysical reading of Leibniz's differential calculus and Kant's theory of intensive magnitudes (amongst other wide-ranging ideas).⁶ On this conception of difference reality is comprised of a ceaselessly modulating *pure relationality*—"the flashing world of communicating intensities, differences of differences ... differences between differences"—that never coincides with 'itself' because there *is no* 'itself' with which 'it' could coincide: "everything bathes in its difference, its dissimilarity and its inequality, even with itself" (DR 117, 243).

What follows will be divided into four sections. In the first section I will offer a brief survey of the extant literature on the topic of Deleuze's transcendental stupidity. In the second section I will explain the origins of the problem of stupidity in Deleuze's philosophy by showing how Deleuze seeks to contrast his conception of stupidity, as a truly transcendental or ontological stupidity, from the Cartesian conception of stupidity as error. The third section will explain the mechanics of Deleuze's transcendental stupidity by showing how it pertains to a constitutive inability on the part of human representational cognition to think the intensive and differential conditions of its own genesis by way of this very mode, and where this very mode is a necessary condition for the thinking of that which it is unable to think. In the fourth section I will offer concluding remarks.

I. Review of the Literature

Much has been written on the problem of stupidity in Deleuze's work. Michel Foucault offers the earliest discussion of this problem in his 1970 article "Theatrum Philosophicum." Foucault discusses the problem of stupidity with reference to the difference between thinking

representationally in terms of “categories” and thinking “acategorically” (Foucault 188-189).

Jacques Derrida also discusses the problem of stupidity and emphasizes a few obscure passages on this problem in *Difference and Repetition* wherein Deleuze states that “stupidity [*bêtise*] is not animality,” but rather a “specifically human form of bestiality” (DR 150). Derrida ultimately finds a certain human exceptionalism in Deleuze’s work, claiming that “these pages of *Difference and Repetition* belong to ... the hegemonic tradition ... where “[e]verything turns around this egologic of the I” (“The Transcendental ‘Stupidity’” 58). Derrida’s criticisms of Deleuze on these points have in many ways determined the subsequent discussions of the problem of stupidity.

Since the publishing of Derrida’s criticism, there have been a number of works which have sought to defend Deleuze. Bernard Stiegler (2015) and Julián Ferreyra (2016) both produce insightful analyses that show, in different ways, how a number of Derrida’s criticisms involve misreadings of Deleuze. While both of these works offer important discussions which aim to show what the notion of transcendental stupidity *is not* (namely a continuance of the hegemonic tradition of “egologic”), there is still much work to be done in offering a positive discussion of what precisely transcendental stupidity *is*, or better: how it works.

Jason Wirth (2015) offers the most in-depth discussion of transcendental stupidity in the third chapter of *Schelling’s Practice of the Wild*, entitled simply “Stupidity.” Wirth offers a number of important points on some of the connections between Deleuze and Schelling with regard to the most negative aspects of stupidity as a will—an “evil” will in Schelling’s words—toward egoistic enclosure over and above difference. Tano Posteraro (2016) also provides a number of insightful points on the most negative aspects of stupidity (and Schelling’s concept of evil). However, my present discussion of transcendental stupidity will emphasize the positive

aspects of transcendental stupidity as it concerns an oscillating movement between a will toward ipseity and a will toward difference. This movement is at once the condition for the possibility of thinking difference as well as its impossibility, and where a will toward ipseity is to some degree *required* (and thus is not wholly negative) for the thinking of this movement. Since Deleuze describes transcendental stupidity as a “relation” and a “mechanism,” my aim is to describe this “mechanism of stupidity” by explaining how it works and why Deleuze calls stupidity “the highest mechanism of thought” (whereas Posteraro and Wirth emphasize the extent to which stupidity is also the “greatest weakness” of thought) (DR 152, 155, 275).

In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze writes: “stupidity is neither the ground nor the individual, but rather this *relation* in which individuation brings the ground to the surface without being able to give it form” (DR 152 –emphasis added). I will later explain what the terms in this sentence mean and how this obscure relation concerns a fundamental inability, or ‘stupidity,’ on the part of human representational cognition to think the intensive conditions for its genesis⁷ precisely because these intensive conditions cannot be thought representationally. But first I will show why Deleuze criticizes the traditional notion of stupidity (conceived of as error) and why he seeks to establish a truly transcendental stupidity.

II. The Problem of Stupidity

The problem of stupidity haunts the entirety of Deleuze’s corpus. On this point I am in agreement with Dork Zabunyan who claims that “it is no exaggeration to say that this problem [of stupidity] traverses the Deleuzian oeuvre in an obsessive manner: From *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962) up to *What is Philosophy?* (1991) ... stupidity occupies and preoccupies

Deleuze greatly” (Zabunyan 2 –my translation). In fact, Deleuze’s preoccupation with problem of stupidity begins six years earlier than Zabunyan has it here. Deleuze first discusses the problem of stupidity in his 1956 lecture “What is Grounding?”⁸

In the “What is Grounding?” lecture, Deleuze writes: “Descartes says that there are imbeciles *de facto*, but never *de jure*. The problem of stupidity is relegated to individual psychology. This interpretation is very serious ... and questionable. He has eliminated stupidity from the theoretical problem of thought, which will be reduced to the true and the false” (WG 51). With these remarks Deleuze draws upon comments made by Descartes in the first section of his *Discourse on Method*.⁹ In the *Discourse* Descartes calls “good sense” the “power of judging well and distinguishing the true from the false,” and he claims that it is “naturally equal in all men ... for everyone thinks himself so well endowed with it [and] it is unlikely that everyone is mistaken” (DM 111). Deleuze summarizes Descartes claim about the equal distribution of “good sense” thus: “nobody say ‘I am stupid.’ Descartes says: let’s take that literally” (WG 50).

On Descartes’ position reason “exists whole and complete in each of us” but some of us stray from the “right path” and the therefore “the main thing is to learn to apply it well” (DM 111-112). In straying from the right path on Descartes’ account, one might find oneself a “*de facto* imbecile” by perhaps making a hasty and incorrect judgment about the truth or falsity of some state of affairs, but such cases of ‘getting it wrong’ will be just that, *cases* of “individual psychology” going astray as a result of not applying reason’s method correctly. For Descartes then, according to Deleuze, reason or “good sense” remains an innate faculty for properly distinguishing the true from the false, and stupidity amounts to error in judgment on the part of “individual psychologies” to correctly correspond to external states of affairs.

It is precisely such a conception of stupidity as “error” that Deleuze finds problematic and overly prominent in a history of philosophy that he sees as promoting a “dogmatic image” of thought wherein “thought” would primarily mean correct recognition (DR 148-149). Thirty-five years after his first 1956 discussion of the problem of stupidity, Deleuze (with Guattari) reiterates the problem in the same terms in his final book *What is Philosophy?*¹⁰ (1991). Here he writes: “Descartes makes error the feature or direction that expresses what is in principle negative in thought. He was not the first to do this, and ‘error’ might be seen as one of the principle features of the classical image of thought” (WP 52). Deleuze has a number of reasons for wanting to overcome the traditional conception of the “negative in thought,” conceived of as error.

Deleuze first takes issue with the traditional idea that error is the negative of thought for the reason that he is operating in a Post-Kantian philosophical framework and cannot accept the kind of Cartesian dualistic framework in which a pure realm of thought could be subverted from without—by say sensory perception—but could not itself go astray. Rather, Deleuze follows Kant by demanding an immanent critique whereby the negative of thought must be explained from within thought itself. There is no shortage of criticisms directed against Kant in Deleuze’s work, but one thing that he always lauds Kant for is his critical restriction of philosophy to explanations from within a field of immanence.

For this reason concerning the demands of immanent critique, Deleuze applauds Kant’s doctrine of transcendental illusion, which explains what “by right is the negative of thought” or in Deleuze’s earlier language, what inheres as a “de jure imbecility” *within* reason: “Kant shows that thought is threatened less by error than by inevitable illusions that come from within reason” (WP 52). Thus it becomes apparent that for Deleuze, a true conception of the negative of thought

must be a “*de jure* structure of thought,” thereby “making stupidity a transcendental problem” (DR 147, 151).¹¹ However, it remains to be seen just how different Deleuze’s conception of transcendental stupidity will be from Kant’s conception of transcendental illusion. Here a few words on Kant’s notion of transcendental illusion are necessary.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant states that there is a “*natural* and unavoidable *illusion* ... that attaches to human reason unpreventably” (*Critique of Pure Reason* 350). Such transcendental illusions arise when reason attempts to transgress its proper limits by attempting to objectively (i.e., conceptually) cognize ideas that exceed the conditions of possibility for such objective cognition. Importantly, for Kant these illusions play a fundamental regulative role in that they spur on the faculty of understanding to strive toward higher knowledge by way of the progressive determination of objects toward the ideal of complete determination. Deleuze’s transcendental stupidity will play a similar positive role in serving as the impetus for thinking, but the goal of complete objective determination will be dropped in favour of the goal of striving to think the genetic conditions constitutive of objective (conceptual) determination *otherwise* than merely under the strictures conceptual determination itself, i.e. to *think difference*. And here we immediately land upon the crux of the difference between Deleuze’s transcendental stupidity and Kant’s transcendental illusion with regard to “what it means to think” (DR 131).

Ultimately, Deleuze finds Kant’s conception of transcendental illusion to be unsatisfactory for a truly critical and transcendental philosophy (as Deleuze conceives of these terms) to the extent that for Kant, transcendental illusions are always immanent *to* the identity of a transcendental subject. Indeed Deleuze finds that ultimately Kant’s critical philosophy is susceptible to the same criticisms that Deleuze launches against Descartes. That is to say, for Deleuze, the philosophies of Kant and Descartes rest upon the form of “good sense” and

“common sense,” which latter Deleuze defines as the presupposed harmoniousness of the faculties of “universal thinking subject” as exercised upon the “form of the unspecified object which corresponds to it” (DR 134). And to the extent that both Kant and Descartes assume this traditional model of thought conceived of as good sense and common sense, Deleuze ultimately finds both philosophers to be in keeping with an orthodox “image of thought” grounded upon the model of recognition and representation (DR 132).

It is precisely in order to critique the dominance of this cognitive model of thought that Deleuze offers a new account of what it means to think in *Difference and Repetition* and throughout his corpus. For Deleuze a new conception of the meaning of thinking amounts to overcoming the dominance of the form of identity throughout philosophy’s history so as to strive to think difference. And thus on Deleuze’s new conception of what it means to think, it is the form of identity itself that takes on the role of transcendental illusion, covering over and “cancelling” difference in the determinate “qualities” and “extensities” and representational thought (DR 214, 228). This fact becomes evident in his brief remarks in response to a question directed toward him by Alexander Philonenko during a discussion on Deleuze’s paper “The Method of Dramatization” held at the Sorbonne in 1967.

Philonenko, having detected the influence of the Kantian philosopher Salomon Maimon in Deleuze’s paper, asks Deleuze what role Maimonian/Kantian illusion plays in Deleuze’s work. Deleuze’s response is initially dismissive: “if what you’re trying to ask me is: what part does illusion play in the schema you’re proposing? My answer is none” (*Desert Islands* 115). But he very quickly corrects himself, stating: “The illusion only comes afterward, from the direction of constituted extensions and the qualities that fill out these extensions” (115). So Deleuze does indeed offer a concept of illusion. And in fact we find this conception of illusion further clarified

in the conclusion of *Difference and Repetition*. Here, Deleuze writes: “illusion takes the following form: difference necessarily tends to be cancelled in the quality which covers it ... It is a transcendental illusion because it is entirely true that difference is cancelled qualitatively and in extension” (DR 266). He adds: “It is nevertheless an illusion, since the nature of difference lies neither in the quality by which it is covered nor in the extensity by which it is explicated” (DR 266).

For Deleuze, the nature of difference lies in a realm of sub-representational intensities and virtual Ideas which, from the perspective of human representational cognition, becomes “covered over by an “image” made up of postulates which distort” it (DR 265). In the third chapter of *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze lists eight postulates of representational thinking —what Deleuze refers to as the “dogmatic image of thought”—which cover over difference with a model of thought grounded in the form of identity (DR 148). It is not necessary here to give a gloss of all eight of the postulates.¹² Suffice it to say that these postulates, as Deleuze himself states, “culminate in the position of an identical thinking subject, which functions as a principle of identity for concepts in general” (DR 265). Thus on Deleuze’s account, the dominant conception of ‘what it means to think’ has been determined by a dogmatic image of thought that conceives of thought under the form of identity and the model of recognition. As Deleuze sees it, such a conception of thought does a grave injustice to the thought of difference to the extent that it conceives of difference under the form of identity; and on this understanding, difference would then amount to difference between identical concepts, or what Deleuze calls mere “conceptual difference” and the “illusion of the negative”: “the negative is difference inverted ... by the requirements of representation which subordinate it to identity” (DR 12, 235).¹³

In opposition to this dogmatic image of thought Deleuze conceives of a philosophy of sub-representational virtual and intensive difference wherein the form of identity would be little more than a “surface” epiphenomenon of human cognitive habits—just one differential field among an infinite plurality of such intensive/differential fields. For this reason, Deleuze states: “Identity and resemblance would then be no more than inevitable illusions—in other words, concepts of reflection which would account for our [human] inveterate habit of thinking difference on the basis of the categories of representation” (DR 119). Evidently, the form of identity itself becomes the by-right negative of thought, or transcendental illusion, precisely to the extent that it covers over the thinking of Difference (*genitivus subiectivus et obiectivus*).¹⁴ Deleuze inverts Kant’s doctrine of transcendental illusion to the extent that it is no longer the case (as it was with Kant) that an innate and “upright” faculty of human thought goes astray by attempting to transgress the limits of categorial conditions of possibility for cognition, but rather that Nature’s unconscious and differential “irrational proper to thought”¹⁵ distorts ‘itself’ by conceiving of ‘itself’ under the guise of human “inveterate habits” of representational cognition, or what is conventionally considered “rationality” (DR 131; *Cinema 2* 187). That is to say, the transcendental “‘Unconscious’ of pure thought,” or pure intensive difference folds back on ‘itself’ and conceives of ‘itself’ in the mode of representational cognition—a mode which would try to conceive of difference in terms of identity (DR 194).

Such inveterate habits comprise what Deleuze calls thought’s “natural stupor [*stupeur naturelle*]” (DR 139; *Différence et Répétition* 181). To be sure, humans would not be the only entity in which the thought of Difference bogs itself down in a “natural stupor” of habitual modes of being. In fact, every entity will have its own inveterate habits and natural stupors to the precise degree to which it simply goes about willing is continued self-sameness (or *not* opening

up to Difference, to put it negatively). And more precisely, Deleuze states that every thing just *is* (its) habits. He asks: “What organism is not made of elements and cases of repetition, of contemplated and contracted water, nitrogen, carbon, chlorides and sulphates, thereby intertwining all the habit of which it is composed?” (DR 75). Thus every organic body is comprised of various ‘contracted habits’ of intertwining elements which will each have a mode of cognition of its own, while the perceptual-psychological mode of being of the organism comprised of such sub-psychological contracted habits, for example the human psyche, just supervenes as a psychic habit upon these sub-representational modes. Deleuze writes: “habit here ... concerns not only the sensory-motor habits that we have (psychologically), but also, before these, the primary habits that we are; the thousands of passive syntheses of which we are organically composed” (DR 74). It is on this point concerning the “contraction” of habits that the first resonances between the works of Deleuze and Schelling become apparent.

In Slavoj Žižek’s perceptive commentary on Schelling’s 1813 *The Ages of the World* (second draft), Žižek remarks upon Schelling’s description of how pure Freedom “‘contracts’ Being” (Žižek 16). He points out how Schelling plays on the double sense of the term “contraction” here: “to tighten-compress-condense *and* to catch, to be afflicted with, to go down with (an illness)” (16). Deleuze too plays on this double meaning of “contraction,” remarking upon how we speak of “‘contracting’ a habit” (DR 74). The main point to be made here is that both Deleuze and Schelling posit ontologies of pure affirmation (of Nature/Freedom in the case of Schelling and Nature/Difference in the case of Deleuze) which, to use Schelling’s term, *inhibits* ‘itself’ in various contractions of relative ipseity. Thus Schelling in his early *Naturphilosophie* work states: “*If Nature is absolute activity, then this activity must appear as inhibited [Gehemmt] ad infinitum. (The original cause of this inhibition must ... only be sought*

IN ITSELF, since Nature is ABSOLUTELY active)” (*First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* 16).¹⁶

Just as Schelling here speaks of an absolute activity that inhibits itself in its various contractions of Being, with Deleuze we can speak of an absolute activity of Difference that *inhabits* ‘itself’ in what he will refer to in his later works (co-authored with Felix Guattari) as various “territorializations,” which we could likewise call ‘habitats’ or *habitus*. To be sure, Deleuze’s conception of the absolute affirmation¹⁷ of Difference, or pure ‘deterritorialization’ is the genetic condition for such territorializations, such preponderances of ipseity in Nature, but there could be no *pure* absolute affirmation (or *pure* deterritorialization) if there were not contracted territories *in which* to express ‘itself.’ And thus there *is no pure* affirmation/deterritorialization, but rather so many milieus of an always already contaminated bleeding of Difference’s/Nature’s affirmation *and* its limitation into one another in varying degrees of intensity.

For Deleuze as for Schelling, absolute affirmation oscillates throughout Nature in various degrees of intensity between intensity $\rightarrow 0$ (or minimal affirmation of Difference) and intensity \rightarrow the *limit* of an entity’s affective capacities to affirm Difference. It is to a discussion of this intensive oscillating movement that I will turn in the following section. However, I wish to first further emphasize the resonances between Deleuze and Schelling with regard to the concept of transcendental illusion.

In his study of Schelling’s 1801 *Presentation of My System of Philosophy*, Petr Rezvykh cites Schelling’s remark that “*there is no individual being*,” noting that “[o]utside of its relationship to the totality, the individual in an of itself is utterly inconceivable, and therefore illusory in principle” (Rezvykh 59). In the same way that for Deleuze there are only teeming

pluralities of various ‘images of Difference’ (in the double sense of the genitive), Rezvykh notes how for Schelling “individual things are simply different ... images of absolute totality” (59). For Schelling it is only the isolated reflective understanding that would seek to separate discrete ‘objects’ from the living nexus of relations in which it consists. For this reason Rezvykh notes how “ [t]ranscendental illusion is born of the very attempt *to think of the individual as the individual* ... transcendental illusion, thus, emerges not in relationship to fundamental essence [i.e. noumenon or Ideas] but in relation to things! [i.e., determinate *objects*]” (60).

Above we saw how Deleuze inverted Kant’s doctrine of transcendental illusion. Here it becoming apparent that Schelling has done the same. Rezvykh’s insightful remarks confirm this: “Schelling unexpectedly turns Kant’s critique of rational theology inside out. According to Schelling’s logic, transcendental illusion does not consist in the fact that we conceive of fundamental essence ... that we are incapable, however, of imagining *in concreto*,” but rather, as noted above, it consists in conceiving of the individual thing as just what (according to the form of identity) it *is*: some determinate *thing* (59-60). Thus it becomes evident that Schelling is in agreement with Deleuze when Deleuze states: “Representation is a site of transcendental illusion” (DR 265).

For Schelling it is equally illusory to posit a self-identical transcendental subject for whom such ‘things’ could be conceptualized, and thus he will launch critiques against Fichte’s absolute ego, Kant’s transcendental subject, and Hegel’s Absolute to the extent that, on Schelling’s account at least, such conceptions of subjectivity would seek to be the ground of themselves. For Schelling as for Deleuze, human cognition is not the ground of itself, but is rather a mere epiphenomenon of the *real groundless ground* of Freedom, Difference, or Nature (*natura naturans*) and ‘its’ thinking. And thus Schelling will state: “I know *nothing*, or *my*

knowledge to the extent that it is mine, is no true knowledge. Not I know, but only totality *knows* in me” (*Idealism and the Endgame of Theory* 143). Similarly, Deleuze states that “it is always a third party who says ‘me’” (DR 75).

For Deleuze and Schelling the task of thinking otherwise than under the form of identity—so as to try to think Difference—involves an intensive oscillation between polar ontological tendencies. The two ontological tendencies are: the tendency toward identity-contraction (toward thought’s “natural stupor”) and a tendency of Differentiation-expansion (toward the limit of an entity’s affective capacities, which limit I call the ‘thought of stupefaction’ and which Deleuze refers to as “stupefied moments” of an encounter with the sublime) (DR 152). For human cognition (at least the kind that Deleuze is most concerned with) this oscillation plays out at different degrees of intensity between a tendency toward the habitual representational mode of thought (*our* natural stupor) and the thought *of* Difference: the maximum degree (or *limit*) of affirmation of Difference to which we are able to push concepts. It is to a discussion of these oscillating tendencies that I turn in the following section. I will show that Deleuze’s transcendental stupidity concerns the relation between these polar tendencies and it amounts to expressing a fundamental inability of human cognition to *think Difference* by way of representational means; however it is this very inability that may serve as the positive means for pushing representation and concepts toward the maximum degree of thinking Difference.

III. Transcendental Stupidity

In the third chapter of *Difference and Repetition*, “The Image of Thought,” Deleuze offers a few dense pages on the issue of transcendental stupidity. Here Deleuze takes up the task

of making “stupidity a transcendental problem” (DR 151). The first important thing to discuss here is precisely how Deleuze is using the term “transcendental.” For Deleuze, the notion of the transcendental differs significantly from the Kantian conception. Indeed the entirety of *Difference and Repetition* amounts to an extended critique of the extent to which Kantian transcendental philosophy is not transcendental enough. As Deleuze sees it, Kant’s philosophy is not transcendental enough to the extent that it is concerned with mere conditions of *possibility* for objective cognition rather than with *genetic* conditions of *real* experience. That is to say, Kant’s transcendental philosophy restricts itself to strictly discursive conditions of possibility located in the categories of the understanding and the relation of these categories to the pure forms of intuition (time and space).

In opposition to the Kantian conception of transcendental philosophy as it concerns the restriction of philosophy to strictly discursive conditions of possible experience, Deleuze takes up the Post-Kantian conception of transcendental philosophy as ‘meta-critical’ and as inquiring into *genetic* conditions of *real* (rather than merely discursively *possible*) experience. Thus, Deleuze states: “it is not the conditions of all possible experience that must be reached, but the conditions of real experience. Schelling had already proposed this aim and defined philosophy as a superior empiricism” (*Desert Islands* 36).¹⁸ Following Schelling, Deleuze takes up the task of meta-critique, where a ‘meta-critical’ philosophical orientation is one that, rather than inquiring into conditions of possibility for experience of objects (as does Kant’s critical philosophy), inquires instead into the genetic conditions constitutive of a transcendental subjectivity that *could then* critically inquire into its own discursive conditions for possible experience of objects, or object-ivity. Meta-critical philosophy seeks to provide an account of the genetic conditions constitutive of the subject-object distinction itself.

Deleuze also locates the genetic conditions for subjectivity in a “superior empiricism” and what he calls, in reference to Schelling, the intensive “play of pure depotentialisation and potentiality” (DR 190-191). Most importantly for my purposes is the fact that it is precisely the oscillating play of these two polar ontological tendencies—depotentialisation (or what Deleuze calls a tendency toward identity/‘territorialization’) and potentiality (a tendency toward difference/deterritorialization)—that concerns the mechanism of transcendental stupidity. First I need to explain some of the key terms that Deleuze uses in his description of transcendental stupidity, and then I will discuss the role of these two ontological tendencies.

A condensed account of Deleuze’s notion of transcendental stupidity is found in the third chapter of *Difference and Repetition* where he writes: “Stupidity is neither the ground nor the individual, but rather this relation in which individuation brings the ground to the surface without being able to give it form” (DR 152). Part of the difficulty of understanding this passage concerns simply establishing what Deleuze means by many of these terms.¹⁹ This difficulty is compounded by the fact that Deleuze uses the term “ground” in at least four different ways in *Difference and Repetition*. Three of these “grounds” need not concern us here since it is precisely against these—which Deleuze attributes to Plato, Kant, and Hegel respectively—that Deleuze opposes his own conception of a “groundless” ground. Following Schelling, Deleuze will call his ground a “groundlessness” [*sans fond*] and an “*Ungrund*” (DR 229). He will sometimes use “ground” and “groundlessness” interchangeably as when he speaks of a “ground, or ... groundlessness ... in which original Nature resides in its chaos” (DR 242). Deleuze also refers to this groundless ground as “depth” and “intensive quantity” (DR 230).

With respect to depth, Deleuze specifically references Schelling’s conception of this notion, stating: “Schelling said that depth is not added from without to length and breadth but

remains buried, like ... the *differend* which creates them” (DR 230). Deleuze does not mention which work of Schelling’s he is drawing upon here, however it appears that he is referencing the “Stuttgart Seminars” where Schelling states that the spatial dimensions of length and breadth are related by a transcendental third—what Schelling will elsewhere call a “living copula”—which articulates them, and which is a key Schellingian term: “Indifference” [*Indifferenz*] (*Idealism and the Endgame of Theory* 217; *The Ages of the World* 105). This key term “Indifference” is precisely what Schelling will call “Ungrund” in his 1809 *Freiheitsschrift*. Indeed it is only a mere two sentences after first establishing his concept of “Ungrund” in the *Freiheitsschrift* that he refers to it as “absolute *indifference*” (*Philosophical Investigations* 68).

The main point to be made here is that the “living copula,” “Ungrund” and “Indifference” are all terms that designate transcendental Difference: they do not designate some *thing* but rather the originary difference (or ‘*differend*’ as Deleuze puts it above) by which Nature articulates or distinguishes itself into various oppositional pairs —length/breadth, hot/cold, fast/slow, past/present, present/future, etc.—and the infinitely many differences by way of which these pairs relate to one another (precisely by way of their *difference* to one another). I will expand upon these points later when I address the issue of quantitative difference. However, I first wish to clarify the meaning of the term “surface” as Deleuze uses it in his description of transcendental stupidity, since the relation between depth (groundless ground) and surface is precisely the relation between intensive difference and representational cognition—the relation that is at issue in Deleuze’s transcendental stupidity.

Deleuze uses the term “surface” in a very specific sense in *Difference and Repetition*. In this work “surface”—or better, “surface effect”—refers to the specifically human mode of empirical cognition as Kant defines it with respect to the harmonious functioning of a subject’s

faculties under the legislative dominance of the faculty of understanding. “Surface” for Deleuze thus refers to the “illusion” that I mentioned above whereby human empirical cognition represents experience in terms of identity, resemblance, quality, extensity and categories (DR 235). Thus Deleuze refers to the “surface effects which characterize the distorted world of representation, and express the manner in which the in-itself of difference [intensity]²⁰ hides itself by giving rise to that which covers it” (DR 117). To be sure, Deleuze refers to “surface” not merely with respect to human representation, but with respect more broadly to what he calls the “actual” (in contrast to the “virtual” and the intensive) and what I earlier referred to as ipseity-contractions and “territorializations.”

Accordingly human representation would then just be one mode of Difference differentiating²¹, actualizing, or territorializing ‘itself’—one mode of empirical manifestation amidst an infinite plurality of fields of other such modes, in which (virtual/intensive/relational) Difference folds back on ‘itself’ by conceiving ‘itself’ in the specifically human mode of representational cognition. This is not at all to say that on Deleuze’s position, there is such a thing as a “human” that then represents to itself the notion of things outside of itself. The point here is much rather that for whatever contingent reasons, there just happens to be this preponderance of a mode of Difference wherein “representations” of “things” occur, and ‘we’ (this preponderance of a mode) call this preponderance “human.”

That we identify and categorize things, our very ‘selves’ included, is just one of our habitual territorializations. It just happens to be the one habit that Deleuze is most concerned with in *Difference and Repetition*. This is the case inasmuch as one of the main aims of *Difference and Repetition* on the whole is to show that representation suffers from a constitutive “Incapacity”²² in its efforts to think difference conceptually. And yet, one of the main aims of

Difference and Repetition is also to think difference conceptually—to “create a concept of difference” (DR 27). The previous two sentences taken together essentially encapsulate Deleuze’s notion of transcendental stupidity, as I will be able to show in passages to follow.

Having defined Deleuze’s use of the term “surface,” I can return to the question of what Deleuze means by “intensive quantity” when he refers to a groundless ground of Difference (DR 230). The groundless ground is pure intensity—“difference in-itself” Deleuze calls it—which is unthinkable from the perspective of representation (the “surface”) (DR 252). Thus when Deleuze speaks about transcendental stupidity as the relation in which individuation “brings the ground to the surface” but is unable to give the ground “form,” he is speaking about a relation in which the surface (representation, the faculty of understanding) *tries* to ‘in-form’ the ground (intensity) with a concept—to “give form” simply means to determine things under concepts—and *fails*.

What Deleuze is referring to here can also be addressed by means of Kant’s dynamic sublime. Deleuze is speaking about the relation in which a subject—the transcendental philosopher in this particular case—attempts to think the ground (difference in-itself) in terms of concepts of the understanding and fundamentally fails in this task due precisely to a shocking encounter with both Difference’s/Nature’s sheer excessive immensity as well as “the inexistence of a whole which could be thought” (*Cinema 2* 168). The issues here have to do with Kant’s notions of the dynamic sublime and negative presentation (*Darstellung*). In the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* Kant describes cases in which the faculty of imagination encounters (in a truly painful manner) an immense “formlessness” in nature—what Deleuze is calling “difference-in-itself”/intensity—which it is unable to schematize such that the understanding could form a concept for it. As Martha Helfer notes, in cases of the sublime, “the imagination,

rather than producing a direct schematic presentation, races to infinity. The subject feels threatened by this failure of the faculty of presentation” (Helfer 42).

However, it is precisely this overpowering nature of the sublime that, by way of bypassing the faculty of understanding, sends a shock straight to the faculty of reason which affirms its transcendental power to produce an idea. As Helfer notes: “*Negative Darstellung* forces the subject to think the supersensible—the idea—without actually producing an objective presentation of this idea. Thus it presents nothing except the process—the striving or effort (*die Bestrebung*)—of *Darstellung* itself” (45). Space constraints do not allow for a full elaboration on Deleuze’s reconceptualization of the dynamic sublime²³ here, but suffice it to say that in Deleuze’s account of transcendental stupidity, the effort of trying to think the (groundless) ground is something akin to this processual striving effort which is taking place between the ground and thought, where the ground is unable to think ‘itself’ precisely because of its nature as an infinite formlessness (pure difference), and the thought of Difference can only *present* ‘itself’ to ‘itself’ (at least in its most intense encounters with ‘itself’) as this sheer formlessness.

The idea of a thought that could present itself to itself as just what it is—the dream of full presence or “absolute comprehension” in Schlegel’s words (see epigram)—is an impossibility, as Fichte has shown, to the extent that in order to be something, that something needs to constantly distinguish itself from something else: “The essence of reason consists in my positing myself, but I cannot do this without positing a world in opposition to myself” (Fichte 83; cf. Giovanelli 72-74). Positing a self *just is* this ceaseless distinguishing of self from not-self. Thus there must be some minimum of self-differentiation in order for something to simply be. And conversely, the idea that there could be some “infinite formlessness”—“infinite affirmation” as Schelling calls it or “absolute incomprehension” in Schlegel’s words—is likewise impossible in that, as

discussed above, infinite affirmation of difference requires the limitations of finitude in order to have something in which to affirm its infinite difference. And thus, to borrow again from Schlegel, what we get with Deleuze is an ontology of so many different modes of Nature, oscillating in various degrees of intensity “*between* absolute comprehension and absolute incomprehension” (Schlegel 113 –my emphasis). These modes oscillate as what Deleuze calls “intensive quantities.” What are these intensive quantities?

Firstly, intensive quantities are not quantities in the sense of discrete numerical units that may be added to one another to form a conglomerate unit that is the sum of its parts. These discrete kinds of quantities are what Kant refers to in the first *Critique* as “extensive magnitudes” (*Critique of Pure Reason* 233). Rather, intensive magnitudes are continuous gradations which do not have summative whole-part relations as do extensive magnitudes. For example, Deleuze offers the case of 30 degrees of heat. He notes that 30 degrees of heat is not the addition of 3 units of 10 degrees of heat: “the 30-degree heat is not the sum of three times ten degrees, it is at the level of extensive quantities that thirty is 10+10+10, but thirty degrees is not three 10-degree heats. In other words, the rules of addition and subtraction are not valid for intensive quantities” (Lecture 03/28/78 –my translation).

Rather than rules of addition and subtraction defining the relations between intensive quantities, they are defined in terms of degrees of gradation within a continuous multiplicity where every degree is just the infinitely small (vanishing) degree that it is, but also where every degree of intensity can only be defined by way of its difference from every other degree in the infinitely continuous nexus of degrees comprising an intensity. Each degree just *is* its difference from the other degrees. It is due to the fact that every intensive degree is ‘in itself’ infinitely small and yet continuous within a heterogeneous nexus of intensive degrees that Deleuze refers

to intensity as “difference in itself.” Intensities are differential relations; they are not comprised of discrete units²⁴, but of *differences*: “differences between differences” (117). As Craig Lundy points out: “Difference can then be said to occur both *at* every level [of intensity] and *between* every level *in precisely that way in which they* [intensities] *differ*” (Lundy 70). On this point, Deleuze describes “intensive ordinates” thus: “Components [intensive magnitudes] remain distinct, but something passes from one to the other, something that is undecidable between them. There is an area *ab* that belongs to both *a* and *b*, where *a* and *b* become indiscernible” (WP 20-21).

Deleuze draws upon a great number of philosophers for his concept of intensity. For example, he expands on Spinoza’s theory of affects and powers which defines entities by their capacities to affect and be affected, the intensities they are capable of being affected by and the intensities they are able to muster in their relations with other entities. He also no doubt draws from Nietzsche’s conception of entities as “multiplicit[ies] of forces” and relations for which *our* “arithmetic is too crude,” due precisely to the fact that ours “is only an arithmetic of single elements,” or what I have referred to above as *extensive* quantities (Nietzsche, *Late Notebooks* 8). Deleuze also draws upon “Schelling’s theory of difference and powers,” or “quantitative difference”—referred to “intensive quantity” and “difference in quantity” in *Difference and Repetition*—and it is this influence which will concern me here, since Schelling’s notion of quantitative difference bears most on the issues concerning transcendental stupidity (DR 226, 230, 325).

The influence of Schelling’s notion of quantitative difference on Deleuze’s philosophy has thus far not received any attention in the literature. This is a considerable lacuna since the notion of quantitative difference is important for an understanding of Deleuze’s transcendental

stupidity and his concept of intensity. It is important because it shows that stupidity relates to difference in an intensive/quantitative manner: stupidity denotes the necessity on the part of pure difference to quantitatively (or intensively) inhibit itself in representational cognition (*if* ‘it’ should so seek to *conceptualize* ‘itself’), but this same inhibiting amounts to the fact that difference can only *conceive of* ‘itself’ in a diminished degree of intensity, and as *object-ified*, i.e., precisely as other than it ‘really is’—because ‘it’ *is not*. Quantitative difference is in-principle unthinkable for representational cognition; but it is that which gives to be thought.

It is clear that Deleuze was in fact influenced by this Schellingian notion of quantitative difference. For example, he states in one of his lectures: “Schelling has a very beautiful word ... that I take a little everywhere ... This is what Schelling calls quantitative differentiation” (Lecture 26/04/83 –my translation). Quantitative differentiation essentially concerns the fact that, for both Deleuze and Schelling, reality is univocal and intensive. As Spinozist immanentists about reality (or ‘monists’ provided we understand this term in a very specific sense), they cannot hold a position in which there would be any real *qualitative* difference in being, or hierarchy of being in Nature/Immanence, for then we would be dealing with an Aristotelian-style metaphysics of equivocity, comprised of hierarchically arranged categories of being. For Schelling and Deleuze, ‘all’ is productive Immanence: ‘all’ is Spinozian Nature *qua natura naturans*. And thus there can be no real *qualitative* distinction, or equivocity, in Immanence, precisely because ‘all’²⁵ is just univocal intensification *of* Nature/Difference—“pure intensity” in Schelling’s words—intensified *differently* in and by every finite mode *of* Intensity (*First Outline* 208). Thus, Daniel Whistler writes: “for a rigorous monism, [intensive] quantity is the only way to distinguish individuals” (Whistler 105). Individuals (modes) are different intensities: not *things*, but relations between relations.

The role of intensive magnitudes and quantitative difference is of crucial significance in Post-Kantian debates.²⁶ For Kant, all that can be known *a priori* about that by which *qualities* of sensation are given (“matter” for Kant) is that they are given as intensive magnitudes or degrees: “in all quality ... we can know *a priori* nothing save [in regard to] their intensive *quantity*, namely that they have a degree” (–cited in Giovanelli 8). Qualities, for example the quality of heat, are given to sensation in intensive degrees which from the standpoint of empirical cognition can become measurable, if one establishes some criterion by which to distinguish degrees of heat from one another, as is allowed by the use of a thermometer. In contrast to extensive quantities which are measurable in an additive fashion by way of conjunction of discrete parts, Giovanelli points out that intensive magnitudes are rather measured “through *equilibrium* (two bodies have the same temperature if putting them into contact does not lead to mutual variations)” (10). Thus, Giovanelli continues, “the degree of temperature does not determine ‘how much heat’ is contained in bodies, but only the difference in the ‘level’ of its distribution relative to their heat capacity. Without this difference in level, the very distinction between hot and cold, and thus the concept of ‘degree’ is meaningless” (10-11).

It is only the difference between two degrees of any sensation that makes those respective degrees the degrees that they ‘are.’ However, a degree should not be taken as some discrete unit, inasmuch as intensive magnitudes are continuous; any ‘one degree’ just *is* its *difference* from the other degrees that make up the continuous nexus of a given intensity, e.g. the intensity of heat. Intensive degrees then are like the differentials of Leibniz’s calculus; they are pure relations, the degrees between which tend toward infinity (vanishing): “between every possible degree of these forces, down to the total disappearance of all intensity (=0) it is possible to have an infinite number of intermediate degrees” (Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* 226) The

difference between positive magnitudes (say, heat) and negative magnitudes (cold) is only distinguishable by way of that point of equilibrium that separates them (thus engendering their relational realities)—Schelling’s *Indifferenzpunkt* or “point of indifference = 0”—the point at which their difference (and thus their realities) would disappear (Giovanelli 101). However, as Giovanelli shows, “temperatures never equalize entirely. Instead, the difference in temperature between two bodies approaches zero in an asymptotic fashion”²⁷, and thus a “sensitive thermometer would show that one of the two bodies remains slightly hotter than the other and will continue to do so to infinity” (10).

We need not limit ourselves to the quality of heat here. For Deleuze and Schelling *all* qualities are produced from out of a sub-qualitative realm of quantitative differences of different forces (intensities) in their oscillations between positive and negative magnitudes. As Schelling states: “all quality rests on [intensive] forces insofar as they have a specific quantity (degree), and since matter presupposes for its possibility opposing forces, and the relationship of these forces according to their degree” (*Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* 252). As mentioned above, two of these opposing forces are those of the expansive (positive) force of difference and the negative contractile force of ipseity. It is helpful to think of these two forces, as do Deleuze and Schelling, with regard to velocity. The expansive affirmative force in Schelling’s words, moves at an “infinite velocity” that “would permit no *real* intuition” and thus requires “inhibitions which continually set bounds to the expansion” (*First Outline of a System* 16).²⁸

Similarly Deleuze speaks of the “infinite speed” of chaos (or Difference) and the inhibiting need (on our part) for concepts that “make up ‘the slow beings’ that we are” (WP 36, 42). In the affirmative ontologies of Deleuze and Schelling the expansive force of Difference moves at infinite speeds. However this affirmative force requires inhibitions in which and with

which to affirm ‘itself.’ And thus Nature, as Giovenelli shows, “is a continual oscillation between permanence and becoming, the tendency toward conservation [contraction] and the tendency toward transformation [expansion]” (106). It is precisely this oscillation that concerns Deleuze with his conception of transcendental stupidity.

As Deleuze sees it, human cognition’s tendency toward contraction plays out as the tendency toward representation, reflection, thinking in terms of discrete identities and divisions between ‘subjects’ and ‘objects.’ These modes of cognition denote a slowing down on the part of affirmative Difference. It is for this reason that Daniel Whistler writes, with regard to Schelling (but which could equally apply to Deleuze): “The category of representation fails to acknowledge ... quantitative differences ... Reflection (and so representation) is to be defined as minimally expressive [or intense] thought” (Whistler 110). Just as Schelling speaks of “degrees of the absolute” we can speak with Deleuze of ‘degrees of Intensity/Difference’ (*Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* 48). And here representational cognition would denote a minimally intense degree of ‘thinking’ (Difference) but nonetheless one which is *required* if our aim, as Deleuze’s is in *Difference and Repetition*, is to *conceptualize* Difference: “to specify the concept of difference as such” (DR 27). If this is the theoretical aim of Deleuze’s transcendentalist ambitions, it is quickly apparent that this aim is secondary to the practical goal of pushing concepts to the limit of their power to intensify the thinking *of* Difference.

Transcendental stupidity denotes the process of Intensity/Difference rising to the “surface” (representational cognition), and trying to give ‘itself’ a “form,” a concept that could adequately think it, *and necessarily failing* since no form *could* contain ‘its’ forces of infinite affirmation—its “infinite velocities.” Intensity attempts to *comprehend* ‘itself’—comprehend both in the sense of “understand” and “circumscribe within definite limits” (as when we speak of

the “comprehension of a concept,” the set of predicates attributable to the concept of something)—in the mode of human representation by trying to in-form ‘itself’ with a concept. However, it is in this very endeavour that ‘it’ is ‘stupid’ or transcendently Impotent with respect to cognizing ‘itself’ since this very endeavour denotes a restricting or contracting of ‘itself’ (into identity)—the precise opposite of its infinitely affirmative expansive force. For human representational cognition the condition for *understanding* Difference is at once the condition for understanding it in a minimally intense degree, and thus representational cognition can be said to be transcendently “stupid” (or Incapable) in its theoretical pursuit of conceptualizing difference.

And yet there is a positive power of transcendental stupidity inasmuch as it is by way of the *practical* aim of pushing our representational habits of cognition (our psychic “natural stumor”) to the limit of their powers to think Difference that we *might yet* encounter, in what Deleuze calls “stupefied moments [*moments de stupeur*]”—stupefied in the sense of *shocking* to our cognitive habits—the sublime in Nature/Difference/Intensity (DR 152; *Différence et Répétition* 197). To encounter the sublime would be to encounter the thought of stupefaction, where our faculty of understanding is reduced to complete impotence but where our power to affirm the Idea of Difference is intensified to its maximum—its limit. Then, as Jean-Clet Martin writes: “one enters a form of exhaustion, a superior form of stupidity which is like a new vigilance” (“Deleuze et Derrida” 53 –my translation). In Kant’s rendition of the dynamic sublime, the reduction of our empirical being to impotence has the positive counter-effect of awakening a power in the faculty of Reason which then allows us to think the (moral) “idea of humanity in our subject,” and its superiority over nature (*Critique of the Power of Judgement* 141).

Deleuze's rendition of the dynamic sublime is different: a faculty of Ideas is awakened—there arises, in Martin's word, a certain "vigilance"—when our empirical mode of cognition is "exhausted," but Deleuze's faculty of Ideas is nothing like Kant's. Thus Daniel Smith states: "For Deleuze, the faculty of ideas is no longer identified with Reason; rather, Deleuze posits Ideas within sensibility itself and defines them, not by their transcendence to Nature, but rather in terms of their immanence to experience itself (the noumenal as immanent)" (*Essays on Deleuze* 231). The question of just what these Ideas are, would take us afield here.²⁹ Suffice it to say that the Ideas along with Deleuze's intensities comprise the sub-representational realm by way of which representational cognition is generated and with respect to which it is transcendently stupid so long as it would attempt to identify them with a concept. But for all that, it is precisely this "stupidity"—the by-right "inability to think" differential Ideas and intensities "at the empirical level"—that is "the source of [thought's] highest power" inasmuch as it is "the existence of [this] stupidity which forces it [thought] to think" precisely by intensively striving to differentiate itself from this stupidity: "Recall Heidegger's statement: 'What gives us most cause for thought is the fact that we do not yet think'" (DR 144, 275).

What Deleuze calls the "inability to think" Difference "at the empirical level," i.e., by way representation, is also the "highest power of thought" to *intensify* the Idea of difference, since it is precisely by pushing this inability or fundamental "Incapacity" to its *limits* that we *might* be able to think difference otherwise than representationally: "Difference is liberated only at the limits of its power" (DR 144, 300). At such liminal moments of course it would be less "us" thinking than an allowing of the Idea of Difference to think through us by opening ourselves to the thought of differential relations and transforming our habitual ways of cognizing and identifying, to the degree that we can. At such sublime moments of stupefaction concepts might

be pushed to limit of their abilities, and the intensive ground of Difference rises to the surface of human cognition without being able to take conceptual form. The groundless ground of intensive difference, in its overpowering immensity—its “chaos” of “infinite speeds,” differential relations vanishing to infinity, and “the inexistence of a whole which could be thought”—sends a shock to the faculty of thought at which point, “thought at last thinks ... ‘the fact that we do not yet think’” (DR 153; WP 42; *Cinema 2* 168).

Curiously, the English translation of *Difference and Repetition* omits a key passage in which Deleuze describes the fundamental Incapacity³⁰ to think Difference (“at the empirical level”) (DR 144). Here Deleuze writes: “Thought only thinks when it is constrained or forced to think, in the face of that which ‘gives to be thought,’ of what is to be thought—and what is to be thought is also the unthinkable or the non-thought, that is the perpetual *fact* that ‘we are not yet thinking’” (*Différence et Répétition* 188 –my translation). In this passage it becomes apparent that for Deleuze something needs to force thinking to arise, and this can only happen in a sublime encounter with thought’s limit—a sublime event of stupefaction—in which Intensity gives itself directly to be thought by shocking the inveterate habits of representational cognition and intensifying the thought *of* Difference to the degree that it can. At such sublime moments of a direct encounter with Intensity we might be then be able think the fact that we are always already not yet thinking difference.³¹

The conditions for the possibility of comprehending Difference, Immanence, and Intensity, i.e., concepts, representation, identity, transcendental philosophy itself, are also the conditions for the impossibility of thinking difference by way of these very means. And yet it is this fundamental Incapacity which is representation’s highest power to the extent that it is this very same Incapacity that *gives to be thought* otherwise—that might yet be pushed to the limits

of what it can do. The limits of what concepts are able to do in their efforts to think difference remain to be seen. The powers of transcendental stupidity await further intensification.

IV. Concluding Remarks

I have sought to show that throughout Deleuze's corpus, he has been at pains to reconceive the "negative of thought." From his early "What is Grounding?" lecture up until his final work *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze strove to offer a conception of the negative of thought with which to oppose the traditional notions of this negative "enemy of cognition" (WG 36). Deleuze never tired of combatting the idea that the negative of thought is "error." The conception of error as the negative of thought grounds itself on the idea that thinking means "correct recognition" or truthful correspondence between subjects' judgements and external states of affairs. For Deleuze this presupposition of a subject-object distinction on the part of Descartes, amounts to the fact that Descartes leaves the *form* of his thought *unthought*: "When philosophy rests its beginning on such implicit or subjective presuppositions, it can claim innocence, since it has kept nothing back—except of course the essential—namely the form of this discourse ... the form of representation or recognition in general" (DR 130-131).

Deleuze follows the Post-Kantian tradition of offering a transcendental philosophy that explains the genesis of the subject-object distinction without presupposing any metaphysical dualism or innate faculty of thought. For Deleuze the negative of thought cannot be something extrinsic to thought, as it is for Descartes, but must be explained from *within* thought, i.e., immanently. And it is for this reason that Deleuze champions Kant's notion of transcendental illusion. However, I have sought to show that Deleuze reconceptualizes the notion of

transcendental illusion. The transcendental illusion as Deleuze sees it, and as he reconceptualizes it with his notion of transcendental stupidity, concerns the fact that representational cognition can only cognize the intensive differential conditions of its genesis as *other* than they really ‘are,’ i.e., in concepts and as empirical qualities and extensities. However, as I have shown, transcendental stupidity is a positive notion in Deleuze’s philosophy since it is by striving to think otherwise than according to the strictures of representational cognitive habits and inhibitions (“slow beings that we are”) that we might yet come to push such habits to the intensive limit of their abilities to affirm Difference.

Notes

¹ Schelling, “Two Poems,” p. 189.

² Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 113

³ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 155. Henceforth cited as DR.

⁴ By “Nature” here I mean something akin to Spinoza’s Substance *qua Deus sive Natura*, or simply Reality. Both Deleuze and Schelling follow Spinoza by positing immanent ontologies of the production of Nature. And most importantly, both Schelling and Deleuze modify Spinoza’s ontology by, in Deleuze’s words, “mak[ing] substance turn around the modes” (DR 304).

⁵ Deleuze uses the term “representation” in a number of ways in *Difference and Repetition*. I am in agreement with Joe Hughes, when he states: “The word ‘representation’ has countless meanings in *Difference and Repetition*. Sometimes representation will be equated with the ‘form of identity,’ sometimes with the form of the ‘concept’ ... Deleuze will equate representation with ‘knowledge,’ the ‘proposition,’ the solution to a problem, consciousness, opinion and judgement. The list is quite long, but all of these instances refer back to one thing: the object” (Hughes 1).

Hughes goes on to point out that the form of identity in the object is perceived in terms of the objectively determined “qualities” and “extensities” that fill it out, citing Deleuze’s remarks in *Difference and Repetition* on this point: “extensity and quality are the two forms of generality ... precisely this is sufficient to make them the elements of representation” (DR 235). For Deleuze, the elements of representation (quality and extensity) cover over the ground of difference, which is *quantitative* (rather than qualitative) and *intensive* (rather than extensive). I will address these points below. Finally, Deleuze associates the terms “reflection” and “recognition” with representation (DR 34, 73). Representation, in Deleuze’s account of it in *Difference and Repetition* does not belong to one particular epoch, but rather stretches in various forms from Plato through Aristotle (“organic representation”) up to Leibniz and Hegel (“orgiastic representation”) and well into twentieth-century with Bertrand Russell (“logical formalism ... of recognition”) (DR 153-154). And various permutations of representation are no doubt well and thriving in the present historical juncture.

⁶ Space constraints prevent me from addressing the role of the differential calculus in Deleuze’s conception of difference, however I will later discuss Deleuze’s concept of intensity, which shares a number of affinities with his concept of the differentials (some scholars even contend that the differentials just are intensities). With regard to Deleuze’s concept of difference and the differential calculus, see Daniel Smith’s excellent essay “Genesis and Difference.”

⁷ Deleuze’s philosophy strives to provide an account of the genetic conditions constitutive of cognition. More broadly Deleuze’s philosophy strives to provide an account of the genetic conditions of *everything*, and this is no doubt why he considered himself a “pure metaphysician” (“Responses to a Series of Questions” 42). Deleuze is also a pure (onto)-*logician* and his (onto)-logics of difference aim to provide nothing less than transcendental conditions for the genesis of

empirical states of affairs (whether of finite cognition as in *Difference and Repetition*, or historical assemblages in *A Thousand Plateaus*, or different kinds of cinematic images in his *Cinema* books). His aim to provide an account of the genesis of cognition follows from the Post-Kantian demand of establishing a meta-critique that would provide an immanent and genetic account of the subject-object distinction (and thus cognition). Deleuze's task of establishing an account of the genesis of subjective cognition also takes up from Leibniz's demand of providing the *sufficient reason* for the existence of a state of affairs; *everything* must have a reason and the challenge for Deleuze is to provide a transcendental logic that would explain how a given state of affairs came about. Thus, Deleuze's interest is in providing a "logic of sense" (the title of one of his books) that would explain the genesis of representational cognition from out of a non-representational transcendental field of sense. Finally, Deleuze takes up Nietzsche's task of genealogy, whereby the challenge is to think (or "make *sense* of") *this* determinate historical milieu's modes of cognition, how *they* came to be, how *we* are cognizing—by way of what practices, conditioned by what values, perspectives, modes of existence, relations of power—*here and now?*

⁸ Henceforth cited as WG

⁹ Henceforth cited as DM

¹⁰ Henceforth cited as WP

¹¹ I should point out here that Deleuze's use of the term "transcendental" differs significantly from Kant's use of this term. Cursorily, Kant uses the term "transcendental" to designate immanent *a priori* conditions on the part of subjects' cognitive faculties for the possible experience of determinate objects. Deleuze uses the term "transcendental" to designate the

immanent conditions for the *genesis of real* (rather than possible) experience. I will address these points in greater detail below.

¹² Deleuze offers a condensed synopsis of the eight postulates in DR, 167. I have been primarily discussing postulates one through five here, with an emphasis on the fifth postulate: “the postulate of the negative, or of error (in which error expresses everything which can go wrong *in* thought, but only as the product of *external* mechanisms).”

¹³ To be sure, Deleuze uses the term “negative” and “negation” in a number of ways in *Difference and Repetition*, but he is critical of all the philosophers who he claims subordinate difference (as he conceives it) to the negative. He is most critical of Hegelian mediation and negation on this point (DR 10, 64 268).

¹⁴ Following Deleuze I will sometimes spell “Difference” with the majuscule, and sometimes with the lower case.

¹⁵ Deleuze calls the thought *of* Difference an “unconscious of pure thought,” and it is for this reason concerning differential Thought’s unconsciousness—its excessive *more-than*-consciousness—that he refers to ‘it’ as an “irrational proper to thought” (DR 155). Here, “non-rational” or “otherwise-than-rational,” might be better terms to use to describe the thought *of* Difference, since it is not so much that the thought *of* Difference is some kind of senseless madness, but rather that it works in ways fundamentally Outside of what commonly goes by the name of human rationality.

¹⁶ The italics and capitals in this passage are Schelling’s.

¹⁷ For Deleuze and Schelling difference is a positive and affirmative idea. Difference affirms difference differently by repeating (itself). Deleuze’s and Schelling’s conceptions of difference must be therefore be distinguished from all negative conceptions of difference. In any case the

terms “positive” and “negative” are fraught with ambiguity when we are dealing with conceptions of a difference *by which* these opposed terms could be distinguished, and which thus must be in a sense both positive and negative and neither. Here we would need to make all of the necessary comparisons between Schelling’s Ungrund/Indifference, Deleuze’s Difference, and Derrida’s *différance* with regard to the question of positivity and negativity (a worthwhile endeavour). For those interested in the connection between Schelling and Derrida on these points, see Fiona Stienkamp’s “*Différance* and Indifference” and Philipp Schwab’s excellent “Nonground and the Metaphysics of Evil.” With regard to the connection between Derrida’s *différance* and Deleuze’s Difference, see Daniel Smith, *Essays on Deleuze*, pp. 271-286.

¹⁸ Cf. *Difference and Repetition*, pp. 231-232: “if it is true that the conditions of possible experience relate to extension, there are nonetheless subjacent conditions of real experience which are indistinguishable from intensity as such” (–translation modified) (*Différence et Répétition* 299).

¹⁹ For reasons of space I will focus on the terms “ground” and “surface” here, as this will be sufficient for my purposes. However, it is important to note here that Deleuze’s use of the terms “individuation” and “individual” carry a precise technical sense and are influenced by the work of Gilbert Simondon.

²⁰ Deleuze refers to “difference in itself” as “intensity” in many places throughout *Difference and Repetition*. For example, he refers to “intensive quantity ... or difference in itself” and “intensity, understood as pure difference in itself” (DR 144, 240). “The expression ‘difference of intensity’ is a tautology” (222). Most concisely: “Intensity is difference” (DR 223).

²¹ Deleuze spells “differentiation” with a “c” in order to distinguish this notion from his concept of “differentiation” (with a “t”). The latter concept concerns “virtual” processes whereas the

former concept concerns “actual” processes: “differentiation determines the virtual ... differentiation expresses the actualization of this virtual” (DR 209). The reciprocal relation of both of these concepts is designated by Deleuze’s notion of “different/ciation” (DR 245).

²² Deleuze spells “Incapacity [*Impouvoir*]” with the majuscule so as to indicate it is a fundamental or transcendental Incapacity.

²³ Very little has been written on Deleuze’s reconceptualization of the dynamic sublime. This is a considerable lacuna, given how important a role the sublime plays in *Difference and Repetition*.

²⁴ As Daniel Smith notes: “It would be nonsensical to speak of an infinitely small term that can be considered singularly” (*Essays on Deleuze* 249).

²⁵ Scare quotes are necessary here because there is no ‘all’; there is no “set of all sets.” If reality is univocal Intensity/Difference, then the idea of there being some totality, or set of all sets, is dismissed as a remnant of Identitarian metaphysics of *uni*-versality. Rather, as I have shown intensive magnitudes cannot be ‘added up’ to make a ‘whole’ that would be the sum of its parts—only *extensive* magnitudes work that way. Rather intensive magnitudes are *purely relational* (like the differentials of the calculus); and differential relations cannot be added up (to make a whole). This is why Deleuze speaks of “the inexistence of a whole which could be thought” (*Cinema 2* 168).

²⁶ For a brilliant account of the role of intensive magnitude and quantitative difference in Kant’s philosophy and its fundamental importance in Post-Kantian debates see Marco Giovanelli’s *Reality and Negation – Kant’s Principle of Anticipations of Perception*. My account of these issues here is indebted to Giovanelli’s work.

²⁷ Deleuze addresses this point in DR, p. 234.

²⁸ The relations between the speeding up of infinite velocity and its slowing down in contractile inhibitions is what Deleuze refers to in the citation given above (p. 20) as “potentiality” (speeding up/expanding) and “depotentialisation” (slowing down/contracting). Deleuze no doubt also has in mind Spinoza’s conception of the differential relation between movement and rest conceived as degrees of power.

²⁹ The question regarding the relation between intensities and virtual Ideas in Deleuze’s philosophy is currently under debate and in need of further research. Some scholars claim that Deleuze’s intensities just are virtual Ideas, while others claim that we must draw a firm distinction between the two. For an overview of the debate see Sean Bowden’s “The Intensive Expression of the Virtual.” Bowden argues that we must draw a firm distinction between intensities and Ideas. I am inclined to agree with his arguments. However, there are also good reasons in support of the claim that Ideas are intensities.

³⁰ Deleuze’s transcendental stupidity could acceptably be called “transcendental Incapacity” which latter name is in some ways preferable to the former in that it does away with the influence of any common connotations of the term “stupidity” on Deleuze’s notion.

³¹ “For a brief moment we enter into that schizophrenia in principle which characterizes the highest power of thought ...” (DR 58).

Works Cited:

- Bowden, Sean. "The Intensive Expression of the Virtual: Revisiting the Relation of Expression in *Difference and Repetition*." In *Deleuze Studies* 11.2 (2017): 216-239. (Print).
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- _____. *Desert Islands and Other Texts: 1953-1974*. Trans. Michael Taormina. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004.
- _____. *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- _____. *Différence et Répétition*. Paris: Presses Universaire de France, 1968.
- _____. Lecture 21/03/78. Trans. Melissa McMahon. Online: <http://www.webdeleuze.com/textes/67> [last accessed Jun. 5 2017].
- _____. Lecture 26/04/83. Online: http://www2.univ-paris8.fr/deleuze/article.php3?id_article=241 [last accessed Apr. 6 2017]
- _____. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- _____. "Responses to a Series of Questions." In *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development*. Trans. Anonymous. Ed. Robin Mackay. 3 (2007): 39-44. (Print).
- _____. *What is Grounding?* Trans. Arjen Kleinherenbrink. Eds. Tony Yanick, Jason Adams, and Mohammad Salemy. Transcribed notes taken by Pierre Lefebvre. Grand Rapids: &&& Publishing, 2015.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Derrida, Jacques. "The Transcendental 'Stupidity' ('Bêtise') of Man and the Becoming-Animal According to Deleuze." In *Derrida, Deleuze, Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Gabriele Schwab. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Descartes, René. *Discourse on the Method*. In *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Vol 1*. Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

- Ferreya, Julián. "Deleuze's Bêtise: Dissolution and Genesis in the Properly Human Form of Bestiality." In *Comparative & Continental Philosophy* 8.1 (2016): 1-11. (Print).
- Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftlehre) nova methodo*. Trans. Daniel Breazeale. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.
- Foucault, Michel. "Theatricum Philosophicum." In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.
- Giovanelli, Marco. *Reality and Negation – Kant's Principle of Anticipations of Perception: An Investigation of its Impact on the Post-Kantian Debate*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2011.
- Helfer, Martha B. *The Retreat of Representation*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Hughes, Joe. *Deleuze's Difference and Repetition*. London: Continuum, 2009.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1996.
- Lundy, Craig. "Emerging from the Depths: On the Intensive Creativity of Historical Events." In *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 18.1 (2010): 67-85. (Print).
- Martin, Jean-Clet. "Deleuze et Derrida, ce ne pas le même Mouvement." In *Chimères* 81 (2013): 45-54. (Print).
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Writings from the Late Notebooks*. Trans. Kate Sturge. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Posteraro, Tano. "Transcendental Stupidity: the Ground become Autonomous in Schelling and Deleuze." In *Symposium* 20.2 (2016): 1-21. (Print).
- Rezvykh, Petr V. "Absolute Affirmation and the Conditions of Meaning: Logical-Ontological Paradoxes of F.W.J. Schelling's 'Identity Philosophy'." Trans. Nora Seligman Favorov. In *Russian Studies in Philosophy* 49.4 (2011): 41-64. (Print).

- Schelling, FWJ. *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*. Trans. Keith R. Peterson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.
- _____. *Idealism and the Endgame of Theory*. Trans. Thomas Pfau. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.
- _____. *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*. Trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- _____. *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. Trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.
- _____. *The Ages of the World*. Trans. Jason Wirth. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.
- _____. "Two Poems." Trans. Daniel Whistler and Judith Kahl. In *Clio* 43.2 (2014): 177-195. (Print).
- Schlegel, Friedrich. *Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Peter Firchow. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- Schwab, Philipp. "Nonground and the Metaphysics of Evil. From Heidegger's First Schelling Seminar to Derrida's Last Reading of Schelling (1927-2002)." In *Analecta Hermeneutica* 5 (2013): 1-30. (Print).
- Smith, Daniel W. *Essays on Deleuze*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.
- Smith, Daniel W. "Genesis and Difference: Deleuze, Maimon, and the Post-Kantian Reading of Leibniz." In *Deleuze and the Fold: A Critical Reader*. Eds. Sjoerd van Tuinen and Niamh McDonnell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Stiegler, Bernard. *States of Shock: Stupidity and Knowledge in the 21st Century*. Trans. Daniel Ross. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015.
- Steinkamp, Fiona. "Différance and Indifference." In *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 22.3 (1991): 185-196. (Print).
- Whistler, Daniel. *Schelling's Theory of Symbolic Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Wirth, Jason M. *Schelling's Practice of the Wild: Time, Art, Imagination*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015.

Zabunyan, Dork. "La Bêtise: 'Faculté Pitoyable' ou 'Faculté Royale'?" *Revue Flaubert* 7 (2007): 1-17. Print.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Abyss of Freedom*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997.