

Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari and the *Rhuthmoi* of Being - part 1

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After epistemology and methodology discussed in Chapter 1, Chapter 3 presented a very broad picture of the world ranging from the deepest foundations of the being to the actual existing beings in all their diversity and complexity. Deleuze and Guattari first discussed what they called the “process of stratification” into physical, organic, and social strata, with a special attention to its ontological foundation on “expression.” They then introduced a theory of individuation of living beings as “machines” endowed with changing “territorialities.” The third part of the chapter addressed the questions raised by the specificity of the human and social stratum with special attention to its technological and linguistic foundations. The fourth tried to elaborate a theory of sign that would be consistent with the conclusions reached in the previous sections and free from any dualism. The conclusion of the chapter elaborated further the ontological considerations exposed at the beginning.

Although Deleuze and Guattari presented their work as an exercise in “nomadic thinking,” they actually developed in Chapter 3, much like Morin, a complete cycle which was intended to encompass the whole history and nature of the universe. In fact, Chapter 3 provided a fully articulated cosmo-ontology that remarkably addressed the same points covered in Morin’s *Method*. Of course, this is not a question of priority or ownership of ideas, but it is quite remarkable that three great thinkers attempted, in the very same years, to develop comprehensive theories encompassing nature, machines and information, and, what is more, on comparable *rhuthmic* bases.

Earth, Assemblages, Strata as Fundamental *Rhuthmoi* of the Being

The most fundamental basis of the world was what Deleuze and Guattari strangely called “the Earth.” As a matter of fact, the latter was described as composed of “unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities, by mad or transitory particles.” It was “a body without organ,” which contained an infinite number of molecular and mobile quanta of matter and energy.

He [Professor Challenger] explained that the Earth—the Deterritorialized, the Glacial, the giant

Molecule—[was] a body without organs. This body without organs [was] permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities, by mad or transitory particles. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 40, my mod.)

At first, “the Earth” resembled the first steps of cosmogenesis in Morin’s narrative: the *big bang* projecting the first cloud of photons, the materializing of the first particles, their aggregation in simple nuclei then in atomic compounds. But it soon became clear to the reader that the “Earth” was considered the underlying reality even today. More than a first phase in the history of the world as reconstituted by modern cosmo-physics, it was a basic metaphysical datum concerning the part “before” the being becomes “actual” or “starts” to really exist under the various forms it actually takes, that is, what philosophers called its “virtual” part. This was Deleuze and Guattari’s manner to address the question of the “foundational crisis” that stroke philosophy with Nietzsche in the second half of the 19th century and mathematics in the early 20th century (Lapoujade, 2014, p. 31). The Earth was the virtual and self-disappearing foundation of all that existed.

At the same time, the Earth was the place of a constant process of “stratification,” that is, in Deleuze and Guattari’s own words, of “giving form to matters, of imprisoning intensities or locking singularities into systems of resonance and redundancy,” and, by so doing, of “producing upon the body of the earth molecules large and small and organizing them into molar aggregates.”

For there simultaneously occur[red] upon the earth a very important, inevitable phenomenon that [was] beneficial in many respects and unfortunate in many others: stratification. Strata [were] Layers, Belts. They consist[ed] of giving form to matters, of imprisoning intensities or locking singularities into systems of resonance and redundancy, of producing upon the body of the earth molecules large and small and organizing them into molar aggregates. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 40, my mod.)

Whereas Morin had used physics, biology, and archeology narratives, to recall that after the first moments following the *big bang*, there had been formation of atomic compounds under gravitational forces, ignition of local thermonuclear chain reactions, constitution of stars and of planets circulating around the stars, slow and complex emergence of life on earth, and finally constitution of human societies, Deleuze and Guattari thus opted for describing the formation of a “distributed” reality in “forms,” “resonant systems,” and “molecular aggregates,” organized according a few main strata (energetic, physico-chemical, geological, p. 41, 57; organic, p. 41, 58; cultural and social, p. 60). This formation did not involve actually any history but a differentiated metaphysical passage, that was still active, from the virtual to the actual side of the being.

Naturally, as explained in the introduction of the book, any rhizomatic description should reconstitute the process of “stratification” in its paradoxical and dynamic entirety by considering the persistence in it of an opposite tendency towards “destratification.” Coding and territorialization, by which stratification and distribution occurred, were never free of some reverse decoding and deterritorialization processes that made the virtual side of the being reemerge from time to time. In other words, the passage from the virtual to the actual was never complete; there was no entirely congealed stratum: even the most resistant geological strata knew of changes of form due to thrust, folding and erosion. Similarly, the passage from the actual to the virtual was never absolute; there

never was total dispersion of quanta of movement or matter. The completely actual was as remote as the completely virtual from the existing systems which were, so to speak, riding the flow in between (p. 40).

Any existing concrete system thus appeared as a “machinic assemblage” of “intensive processes” that had to deal, on one side, with the actual strata and layers within which it had appeared and, on a second side, with the virtual “plane of consistency” or “body without organs” to which it remained nevertheless connected. Their existence was caught in a constant dynamic cycle transforming the “Earth” or the “body without organ” or the “plane of consistency” into “Strata,” and, reversely, the actual “Strata” into “Earth,” etc.

The surface of stratification [was] a machinic assemblage distinct from the strata. The assemblage [was] between two layers, between two strata; on one side it face[d] the strata (in this direction, the assemblage is an *interstratum*), but the other side faces something else, the body without organs or plane of consistency (here, it is a *metastratum*). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 40, my mod.)

Nothing existing was fixed, everything that appeared to be steady was participating in contrary processes of stratification and destratification that could never end. This was Deleuze and Guattari’s first way to reinterpret the old *rhuthmic* Heraclitean motive: *panta rhei* and—as Daniel Smith and John Protevi rightly put it in a very concise but clear synthesis—to contribute to the newer but no less *rhuthmic* Process philosophy. We will see that they elaborated further this idea at the end of the chapter.

Any concrete system is composed of intensive processes tending toward the (virtual) plane of consistency and/or toward (actual) stratification. We can say that all that exists is the intensive, tending towards the limits of virtuality and actuality; these last two ontological registers do not “exist,” but they do “insist,” to use one of Deleuze’s terms. Nothing ever instantiates the sheer frozen stasis of the actual nor the sheer differential dispersion of the virtual; rather, natural or worldly processes are always and only actualizations, that is, they are processes of actualization structured by virtual multiplicities and heading toward an actual state they never quite attain. More precisely, systems also contain tendencies moving in the other direction, toward virtuality; systems are more or less stable sets of processes moving in different directions, toward actuality and toward virtuality. In still other words, Deleuze and Guattari are process philosophers; neither the structures of such processes nor their completed products merit the same ontological status as processes themselves. (Daniel Smith & John Protevi, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2018)

Double Articulation as Primary Form of Cosmological Stratification

Having exposed the foundations of their process ontology, Deleuze and Guattari focused on the nature and organization of the cosmological strata. Strikingly, as Morin, they used for this purpose the concept of “double articulation.”

We remember that Morin linked the “double articulation” in late human language discovered by Martinet with a proto-double articulation that would have emerged in the most early stages of the biotization process. The twofold structure of the stream of speech, which could be primarily divided into *meaningful* signs (like words or “morphemes”), and then secondarily into *distinctive* elements (like letters or “phonemes”), had actually emerged, so he claimed, exactly at the same time as life, due to the first informational loops that formed in proto-living beings “as soon as one agent (the base in RNA) [became] a signal for the other agent (enzyme), and conversely” (*Method*, vol. 1, 1977, trans. J.-L. Roland Bélanger, 1992, p. 327).

Without mentioning Morin, Deleuze et Guattari objected to the idea that “double articulation” in nature would anticipate that existing in language, because this would illegitimately extend into nature an anthropocentric scheme, however they thought possible to use the concept if taken in a much larger sense to describe the basic features of the process of stratification.

Each stratum exhibits phenomena constitutive of *double articulation*. Articulate twice, B-A, BA. This is not at all to say [yet] that the strata speak or are language based. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 40, my mod.)

Each stratum, Deleuze and Guattari claimed, was “articulated” in two ways: from “particles” simply laid down in “statistical order” and from “functional, compact, stable structures” organizing the particles in “molar compounds.” As we will see, they were going to complicate further this model a few pages below, depending on the strata that was considered.

The first articulation [would] choose or deduct, from unstable particle-flows, metastable molecular or quasi-molecular units (*substances*) upon which it [would] impose a statistical order of connections and successions (*forms*). The second articulation [would] establish functional, compact, stable structures (*forms*), and construct the molar compounds in which these structures are simultaneously actualized (*substances*). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 40-41, my mod.)

The first type of articulation was “supple, more molecular, and merely ordered,” while the second one implied “phenomena of centering, unification, totalization, integration, hierarchization, and finalization” (p. 41). However, this double manner to articulate the “particle-flows” was not, they insisted, equivalent to the opposition of matter and form. Both the articulations by “statistical order” or by “functional structures” implied “a code *and* a territoriality,” or, to put it more precisely and to avoid any fixed view, both referred to “modes of coding and decoding” *and* “degrees of territorialization and deterritorialization.” Consequently, both entailed simultaneously “form and substance” (p. 41).

Contrary to Morin, who first carefully described the physical stratum before addressing the phenomenon of life, Deleuze and Guattari resolutely “skipped over the immense diversity of the energetic, physico-chemical, and geological strata” and “went straight to the organic strata, or the existence of a great organic stratification” (p. 41). The main question was, they said: “*How to ‘make’ the body an organism?* [comment ‘faire’ un organisme au corps ?]” (p. 41), in other words, how to

explain the emergence of living organisms out of the sheer corpuscular basis of the “body without organ”?

Strikingly, their answer was quite close to Morin’s—which was of no surprise because it was based on the same biological knowledge (they largely quoted Jacques Monod and François Jacob). At the molecular level, “crowd phenomena or statistical aggregates” determined some “order (the protein fiber and its sequence or segmentarity)” that was the basis for a superior integration into “stable structures that ‘elect[ed]’ stereoscopic compounds, form organs, functions, and regulations, organize[d] molar mechanisms, and even distribute[d] centers capable of overflying crowds, overseeing mechanisms, utilizing and repairing tools” (p. 42, my mod.).

The only difference was the concept chosen to encapsulate the passage from “crowd phenomena” to “organic systems.” While Morin conceived of it as a “tetralogical loop” linking, one remembers, disorder, interactions, order, and organization together [1], they used the concept of “folding,” that was to be elaborated further in Deleuze’s book on *Le Pli. Leibniz et le baroque* a few years later (1988). Organic structures were both actively “‘overcoding’ the aggregate” and resulting from “the folding back on itself of the fiber,” thus repeating at the level of the organic stratum the folding operation that had already occurred at the physical and geological levels. After “sedimentation and folding [*plissement*], [there were] fiber and infolding [*repliement*]” (p. 42).

An identical “folding movement” was to be found at the most simple level of “cellular chemistry presiding over the constitution of proteins” by “articulation between small and large molecules,” which respectively implied “a segmentarity by successive modifications” and “[a segmentarity by] polymerization” (p. 42, my mod.), at the more complex level of the “genetic code,” which was in turn “inseparable from a double segmentarity or a double articulation, this time between two types of independent molecules” (p. 42), and at the even more complex level of the animals since, according to Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, it was always possible to “get from one form on the organic stratum to another, however different they may be, by means of ‘folding’” (p. 46).

Compared to Morin’s fourfold concept, Deleuze and Guattari’s sounded a little less elaborate, however both metaphors, “folding” as much as “loop,” implied dynamics and return movement. Moreover, as we are going to see now, Deleuze and Guattari’s enriched the picture with a sophisticated metaphysical background that was, at least explicitly, absent from Morin’s perspective.

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Footnotes

[1] For Morin, the existence of “organizations,” biological as well as physical, was based on unexpected events, irreversible transformations, and stabilizing cycles and loops. “Homeostatic beings,” “active organizations” and “machines” depended for their existence on the intertwining of internal and environmental loops which resulted in “flowing selves.”