

## Chapter 6

---

# Kant, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze and the Constitution of Experience

*Henry Somers-Hall*

---

In this chapter, I want to explore the relationship between Kant's account of the constitution of experience and the accounts developed by Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze. Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze both hold ambivalent attitudes toward Kant's account of how experience is to be understood. It is Kant who places synthesis at the centre of the constitution of the world, and who discovers the concept of a transcendental illusion, a concept central to the thought of both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze.<sup>1</sup> Kant holds that basic ontological concepts such as that of an object are simply ways of organising experience, rather than fundamental structures given in space and time. Furthermore, Kant breaks with the metaphysical tradition in recognising that time itself has a positive existence outside of categorial thought.<sup>2</sup> 'Time is not a discursive, or what is called a general concept, but a pure form of sensible intuition' (Kant 1929: A32). Both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze argue, however, that Kant leaves unexamined the nature of the world which is to be explained through the transcendental idealist method. Similarly, both seek to replace the notion of synthesis as a process that takes place from nowhere with one that unfolds within the temporality of the world. Perhaps Merleau-Ponty expresses this most clearly when he writes that:

We must make this notion of the world, which guides the whole transcendental deduction of Kant, though Kant does not tell us its provenance, more explicit. 'If a world is to be possible', he says sometimes, as if he were thinking before the origin of the world, as if he were assisting at its genesis and could pose its *a priori* conditions. In fact, as Kant himself said profoundly, we can only think the world because we have already experienced it; it is through this experience that we have the idea of being, and it is through this experience that the words 'rational' and 'real' receive a meaning simultaneously. (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 16)

Now, there are a number of key claims in this passage that will be central to both Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty's readings of Kant. First, we can note that Merleau-Ponty makes a distinction here between thinking and experience. As we shall see, this distinction introduces two different ways of understanding what it is for something to have a determination, and has affinities with Deleuze's own distinction between representation and intensity. Second, Merleau-Ponty here implies that Kant presupposes experience, but that he does not provide a proper analysis of it. In Deleuze too, we shall find that for every synthesis Kant proposes, Deleuze will argue that there is a passive synthesis that makes it possible. Third, Kant illicitly assumes that the kind of determination that we find in thinking or representation is prior to the genesis of the world, and is responsible for it. Once again, this will be disputed by both Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty, and here we can find an unlikely parallel between Deleuze's claim of a continuing 'psychologism' (1994: 135) in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and Merleau-Ponty's claim that Kant mischaracterises experience as 'mutilated thought' (1968: 35) in the *Critique*. For Deleuze, psychologism relates to a model of the subject already overrun by representation, and Merleau-Ponty's mutilated thought is one that similarly understands experience from the point of view of the categories of judgement.

I want to begin by looking at Kant's account of synthesis in the first *Critique*. We will focus on the transcendental deduction, but the aim will be to look at what Kant takes synthesis to be. We will then explore how this ties in to his account of determination as he sets it out in the transcendental ideal, since it is this account that Deleuze takes up explicitly. Following that, we will turn to Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty's accounts of synthesis. I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's influence on Deleuze's account of synthesis is significant, despite the paucity of explicit references to Merleau-Ponty in most of Deleuze's work. We will see how Deleuze's account of determination as a lightning flash can be understood in both Deleuzian and Merleau-Pontian terms. Having seen how Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty's accounts of determination differ from Kant's, we will then explore how this difference in determination leads both philosophers to a radically different notion of synthesis.

## **Kant on Synthesis and Determination**

Given Kant's claim that time is not conceptual, his account of synthesis is integral to his project. For pre-Kantian philosophers, a key problem

was justifying the correspondence of our concepts to objects in the world. Kant solves this problem but in turn opens up a novel problem of how concepts are to be related to our intuition of time, given their difference from each other. The heart of Kant's solution to this problem is found in the *Critique's* transcendental deduction, where he shows the role of synthesis in bridging the gap between the faculties. Now, the essential move Kant makes in the *Critique* is to argue that rather than objects making representations possible, representations make objects possible. In order to make this move, Kant asks what concepts allow us to understand the world in terms of objects. The key concept that makes this understanding possible is the concept of an object itself: 'Now all experience does indeed contain, in addition to the intuition of the senses through which something is given, a *concept* of an object as being thereby given, that is to say, as appearing. Concepts of objects in general thus underlie all empirical knowledge as its *a priori* conditions' (Kant 1929: A93/B126). Since the concept of an object is not given in intuition, the aim of the deduction becomes to show how we are able to understand experience in terms of objects rather than simply the flux of intuition. Ultimately, Kant's claim will be that we can only understand experience as experience of a world of objects insofar as we see the subject as introducing the concept of an object to experience, and this in turn is only possible through the application of the categories of the understanding to the manifold of intuition.

Kant substantially rewrites the transcendental deduction between the first and second editions of the *Critique*, but what is central to both editions is the notion of synthesis. In the deduction in the second edition, Kant begins with the claim that 'It must be possible for the "I think" to accompany all my representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me which could not be thought at all, and that is equivalent to saying that the representation would be impossible, or at least would be nothing to me' (1929: B132). Without being able to see all representations as mine, we would just have a series of fragmented impressions with no unity. Kant notes that even if representations are already united, then we still require a moment of synthesis here to recognise the unity within representations. Kant's claim is that this unity of apperception, the 'I think', is analytic, and presupposes a prior synthetic unity that is actually responsible for unifying representations. Since this transcendental unity is what makes experience possible, it itself falls outside of experience, and therefore cannot be determined in the way we determine empirical phenomena. It is this synthetic activity that allows us to understand the subject as unified:

That relation comes about, not simply through my accompanying each representation with consciousness, but only in so far as I *conjoin* one representation with another, and am conscious of the synthesis of them. Only in so far, therefore, as I can unite a manifold of given representations in *one consciousness*, is it possible for me to represent to myself the *identity of the consciousness in [i.e. throughout] these representations*. In other words, the *analytic* unity of apperception is possible only under the presupposition of a certain *synthetic* unity. (Kant 1929: B133)

What allows us to relate these representations together in one consciousness is that these representations are understood as representations of an object. The object therefore provides a point of reference to allow us to refer the manifold given by intuition to a point of unity. Seeing representations as referring to an object is also a requirement for being able to distinguish representations from the self. Just as the subject is not given in experience, so the transcendental object is simply a way of organising what is given in experience, and hence has to be understood as ‘something in general = x’ (Kant 1929: A104).

Understanding what Kant takes synthesis to be is complicated by the side-lining of his account of the three syntheses in the second edition of the *Critique*, and by the identification in that edition of the imagination and the understanding. For our purposes, it is important to note that Kant’s general definition of synthesis is as ‘the act of putting different representations together, and of grasping what is manifold in them in one [act of] knowledge’ (1929: A77/B103). In the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and more briefly in the second, Kant gives an account of experience in terms of synthesis. This account, which Kant labels a subjective deduction, involves three syntheses that together organise intuition and relate it to the categories. First, in what he calls the synthesis of apprehension in intuition, Kant claims we need to take what is given as an indeterminate intuition of time, and organise it into both individual elements and a unity of these elements as a sequence. ‘Every intuition contains in itself a manifold which can be represented as a manifold only insofar as the mind distinguishes the time in the sequence of one impression upon another’ (A99). This synthesis which creates the manifold is followed by a second synthesis, the synthesis of reproduction in imagination, which holds that if experience is to be understood as ordered – as, for example, we find in the empiricist claims that laws of association can make sense of experience – then appearances must be ‘actually subject to such a rule’ (A100). Similarly, if we are to draw a line, we need to be able to relate not just present impressions, but also prior impressions in order to be conscious of a

sequence. Finally, Kant's account of the third synthesis holds that in order to understand a sequence as a whole, we do not need to simply have the consciousness of the elements themselves, but require a consciousness that the elements relate together into a unity. Such a unity of a manifold of representations under a generic identity is a conceptual unity, and such a conceptual unity requires consciousness of the identity of the various elements that make it up. This unity is in turn supplied by relating all representations to the transcendental object, and this in turn relies on synthesising representations according to the categories, which are transcendental forms of the functions of judgement, which we use to make logical claims.

This account raises a number of questions about the nature of the syntheses involved. As we have seen, Kant defines synthesis at one point as 'the act of putting different representations together, and of grasping what is manifold in them in one [act of] knowledge' (1929: A77/B103). How are we to understand this in terms of determination? When we look at the third synthesis, which is explicitly conceptual, we can note that since it is categorial, it has its roots in the way in which we determine concepts in judgement. Kant is explicit, for instance, in noting that it is the same faculty at work in unifying representations into a judgement and unifying representations into objects. As such, it operates by attributing properties to objects. We will return to the implications of this in a moment, but first, let's consider the first and second syntheses. In the A deduction, these two syntheses are attributed to the imagination, but by the time we reach the B deduction all synthesis is seen as a product of the understanding:

all combination – be we conscious of it or not, be it a combination of the manifold of intuition, empirical or non-empirical, or of various concepts – is an act of the understanding. To this act the general title 'synthesis' may be assigned, as indicating that we cannot represent to ourselves anything as combined in the object which we have not ourselves previously combined. (Kant 1929: B130)

Kant argues that '[i]t is one and the same spontaneity, which in the one case, under the title of imagination, and in the other case, under the title of understanding, brings combination into the manifold of intuition' (1929: B162n). The situation is more complicated in the A deduction, though Longuenesse suggests that the imagination should be taken in the A deduction simply as a non-reflective operation of synthesis according to rules provided by the understanding, in contrast to the reflective operation of the understanding proper.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of

whether we accept Longuenesse's account here, we can note that Kant's account of the imagination sees it as operating in terms of the combination of determinate representations into unities. As such, whichever faculty is responsible for the various syntheses of experience, it fulfils the definition that Kant adopts, namely of 'putting different representations together, and of grasping what is manifold in them in one [act of] knowledge' (A77/B103).

If synthesis involves conceptual determination, then what does Kant take conceptual determination to involve? Kant's claim is that in order to be able to understand the world in conceptual terms, we need to be able to assume that phenomena are so constituted that for any property of an object, it either holds of that object or does not. Without this claim, we won't know when we pose a question about the nature of an object in the world whether an answer could, even in principle, be given. The basis for this principle is the notion of opposition:

The proposition, *everything which exists is completely determined*, does not mean only that one of every pair of *given* contradictory predicates, but that one of every [pair of] *possible* predicates, must always belong to it. In terms of this proposition the predicates are not merely compared with one another logically, but the thing itself is compared, in transcendental fashion, with the sum of all possible predicates. (Kant 1929: A573/B601)

Kant combines this with a further claim that, for transcendental logic, one of the opposed predicates must be understood as primary, and one has to be understood as a limitation of it through the introduction of a negation:

If, therefore, reason employs in the complete determination of things a transcendental substrate that contains, as it were, the whole store of material from which all possible predicates of things must be taken, this substrate cannot be anything else than the idea of an *omnitude realitatis*. All true negations are nothing but limitations – a title which would be inapplicable, were they not thus based up on the unlimited, that is, upon 'the All'. (Kant 1929: A575–6/B603–4)

Now, we can note that for Kant this notion of complete determination is a transcendental idea, which means that we need to assume it in order for reason to investigate the world (if we do not assume that objects are completely determined, then the law of excluded middle would not hold, since it would be possible for an object to not have a particular determination or its negation), but that its truth goes beyond the limits of possible experience. As such, we can see that Kant's account of the synthesis of experience draws together two claims here. First that at

heart all synthesis operates in categorial or at least quasi-categorial terms, and second that such a mode of synthesis is completely determining of the nature of objects we find in the world.

### **Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty on Symmetrical Synthesis**

For Kant, therefore, experience is constituted through the synthesis of representations into unities on a model that is analogous to the synthesis of representations into a judgement. Now, at the heart of the critique of Kant developed by both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze is the claim that Kant illegitimately holds that all synthesis needs to be understood in these terms – as operating on a manifold of discrete moments in order to constitute it as a unity open to discursive thought. For Merleau-Ponty, Kant understands synthesis ‘in a style that is not the sole possible one’ (1968: 32), illegitimately equating synthesis with categorial synthesis, and hence presupposing a vision of the world as fully amenable to judgement. Similarly, Deleuze takes the view that ‘representation is the site of a transcendental illusion’ (1994: 265), this illusion being that all determination operates in terms of opposition and limitation. For both, therefore, at the heart of their criticism is the claim that Kant extends judgement beyond its legitimate domain of operation, thereby falsifying his account of the genesis by forcing it into a juridical account. For the rest of this chapter, I want to look at how Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze respond to this account of synthesis. In the present section, I will consider their accounts of the traditional model of synthesis before turning to their alternative accounts in the next section. As we shall see, both see the model of synthesis as a surface effect of a deeper process.

There is a passage in *Difference and Repetition* that offers up both a Deleuzian and a Merleau-Pontian reading. What is shared by both these readings is an attempt to develop a new account of synthesis and determination that moves beyond our traditional understanding of them. What Deleuze is addressing here is the traditional model of determination that sees it as operating in terms of a relationship between elements that share the same nature, and that are each fully determinate. Deleuze here opposes this model to an account of determination that sees determinations as emerging against a background that escapes from the structure of determination. It is this claim, and the way it plays out in relation to Kant’s transcendental deduction, that I want to explore. I will present the passage here, then we will look at how these two readings tie into Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty’s work:

Difference is the state in which one can speak of determination as such. The difference ‘between’ two things is only empirical, and the corresponding determinations are only extrinsic. However, instead of something distinguished from something else, imagine something which distinguishes itself – and yet that from which it distinguishes itself does not distinguish itself from it. Lightning, for example, distinguishes itself from the black sky but must also trail it behind, as though it were distinguishing itself from that which does not distinguish itself from it. It is as if the ground rose to the surface, without ceasing to be ground. There is cruelty, even monstrosity, on both sides of this struggle against an elusive adversary, in which the distinguished opposes something which cannot distinguish itself from it but continues to espouse that which divorces it. Difference is this state in which determination takes the form of unilateral distinction. We must therefore say that difference is made, or makes itself, as in the expression ‘make the difference’. (Deleuze 1994: 28)

What does it mean here to talk about a unilateral distinction? Normally, we understand determination in terms of elements that are all equally determinate, or at least are determined equally through their interaction. We see this in terms of the difference between things, as Deleuze puts it. For Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, and for Kant, the archetypal model of this account of determination is judging. Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty both understand this in terms of an *extensive* account of relations,<sup>4</sup> where we take extensity to be the kind of model of space found in Euclidean geometry, which is so central to Kant’s model of space in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Deleuze names an account of the world that operates in these terms a sedentary distribution.<sup>5</sup> In characterising how determination operates in extensity, he explicitly takes up the two functions of limitation and opposition.<sup>6</sup> We need to bear in mind that Deleuze’s concepts often have multiple sources, but we can note that one aspect of extensive determination is the model of determination found in Kant’s thought. Deleuze defines it as follows:

We must first of all distinguish a type of distribution which implies a dividing up of that which is distributed: it is a matter of dividing up the distributed as such. It is here that in judgement the rules of analogy are all-powerful. In so far as common sense and good sense are qualities of judgement, these are presented as principles of division which declare themselves the best distributed. A distribution of this type proceeds by fixed and proportional determinations which may be assimilated to ‘properties’ or limited territories within representation. (Deleuze 1994: 36)

Merleau-Ponty foreshadows Deleuze’s notion of a sedentary distribution with what he calls ‘objective thought’, which he defines as ‘thought

applied to the universe and not to phenomena' (2012: 50). Here too, we have the assumption that our basic categories of understanding involve an extensive view of the world, and rely on judgement and conceptual determination. What are the basic characteristics of the sedentary model, or the model of objective thought?

First, we can note that both objective thought and the sedentary distribution deal with the existence of a field of 'ready-made things' (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 99). As Deleuze similarly puts it, 'extensity does not account for the individuations which occur within it' (1994: 229). In effect, for Kant, synthesis involves taking elements that already exist, and synthesising them into unities. This allows us to see the world as 'an invariable system of relations to which every existing thing is subjected if it is to be known . . . like a crystal cube, where all possible presentations can be conceived by its law of construction and that allows its hidden sides to be seen in its present construction' (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 342).

Second, the world for Kant is understood as composed of representations that themselves are all fully determinate. We have seen this already in Kant's notion of determination outlined above. There is thus a symmetry, or, as Kant argues in the Analogies, a reciprocity, between the elements that make up the world around us. As Merleau-Ponty notes, this model rests on an idea of temporality as a series of instantaneous 'nows', in which 'every "elsewhere" is given as another here' (2012: 348) such that everything can in principle be given at once as determinate in perfect simultaneity.

Third, such a synthesis presupposes the notion of a self as the source of the synthetic activity that relates together the representations. Kant notes that even when the self isn't clearly represented, it is still present in our synthesis of the world:

that all the variety of *empirical consciousness* must be combined in one single self-consciousness is the *absolutely* first and synthetic principle of our thought in general. But it must not be forgotten that the bare representation 'I' in relation to all other representations (the collective unity of which it makes possible) is transcendental consciousness. Whether this representation is clear (empirical consciousness) or obscure, or even whether it actually occurs, does not here concern us. But the possibility of the logical form of all cognition is necessarily conditioned by relation to this apperception *as a faculty*. (Kant 1929: A118n)

Fourth, and following from all of the claims we have looked at so far, ultimately synthesis takes as its model the synthesis of judgement, with its concomitant claims to subsumptive relations between determinate

representations. It is judgement that gives us an account of fully determinate properties that are related together in terms of an underlying unity, and that pushes us to ground our account of determination in terms of the relations of a subject to an object.

Fifth, both Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty follow Kant in arguing that at the heart of this model is the ideal of God's view of the world.<sup>7</sup> Even if the world is not a completed synthesis for Kant, it is still the case that the categorial nature of the world precludes an encounter with a genuine moment of indeterminacy in the world. This is the root of Deleuze's claim: '[f]inite synthetic Self or divine analytic substance: it amounts to the same thing' (1994: 58).

Finally, and following from all of these claims, both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze hold that the traditional account of synthesis is based on an understanding of the subject that places it in the universal, and denies it particularity. For both, this claim is associated with common sense, and involves a transcendental illusion. We also find the claim that such an account represents 'the dogmatism of common sense'. As such, it provides the basis for traditional scientific and philosophical enquiry by guaranteeing a common objective framework that is 'the same for everyone, valid for all times and for all places' (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 73–4), independent of the changes in perspective. The determinate model of the world allows for clear and distinct temporally invariant dichotomies in our characterisation of it (50), and hence makes possible traditional models of philosophy or science.<sup>8</sup> In effect, once we separate our perception of things from things themselves, we are able to place all of the indeterminacy we find in perception onto perception itself, and thereby grant to the world outside of us a fully determinate nature. Even in the case of Kant, therefore, time tends toward a medium within which determinations are discovered rather than created. 'The world, in the full sense of the word, is not an object, it is wrapped in objective determinations, but also has fissures and lacunae through which subjectivities become lodged in it or, rather, which are subjectivities themselves' (349).

### Deleuze's Asymmetrical Synthesis

Before going through the differences between the characteristics of symmetrical and asymmetrical syntheses, I want to give a brief outline of what asymmetrical synthesis itself is. In the passage quoted above, Deleuze characterises this in terms of 'lightning, [which] distinguishes itself from the black sky but must also trail it behind, as though it were

distinguishing itself from that which does not distinguish itself from it' (1994: 28). What would it mean for determination not to operate reciprocally? Deleuze's alternative to the sedimentary distribution is the nomadic distribution. He describes this a situation where 'there is no longer a division of that which is distributed but rather a division among those who distribute themselves in an open space – a space which is unlimited, or at least without precise limits' (36). We can see that this also gives an account of synthesis, but not of the synthesis of a field of elements by a subject, but rather of a field that synthesises itself. Rather than diversity, which Deleuze associates with extensity, the nomadic distribution instead operates in terms of difference. 'Difference is not diversity. Diversity is given, but difference is that by which the given is given, that by which the given is given as diverse' (222). Deleuze's claim is that this field of difference gives rise to the kinds of extensive properties that Kant talks about in terms of intensity.

Deleuze takes as his model here embryogenesis, with the egg as a qualitatively indeterminate field that determines the development of the embryo within it. Deleuze argues that the development of an embryo is a process whereby determinate features emerge from an apparently homogeneous field. We can see the egg as a field that appears homogeneous, but which is composed of gradients of intensities. The embryo develops through an unfolding through velocities and distances that are governed by these gradients. In effect, therefore, the egg is for Deleuze a field of forces that determines the transformations of the embryo as it develops. Now, Deleuze argues that 'the world is an egg' (1994: 251), thereby suggesting that these processes can be generalised to everything that exists:

Here too, however, the positive element lies less in the elements of the given symmetry than in those which are missing. An intensity forming a wave of variation throughout the protoplasm distributes its difference along the axes and from one pole to another. The region of maximal activity is the first to come into play, exercising a dominant influence on the development of the corresponding parts at a lower rate: the individual in the egg is a genuine descent, going from the highest to the lowest and affirming the differences which comprise it and in which it falls. (Deleuze 1994: 250)

We can note a number of key features that emerge from this account of the embryo. First, the space of the embryo cannot be understood as a simple extensive space. Rather, the development of the embryo takes place through processes of folding the structure of space itself: 'Embryology shows that the division of an egg into parts is secondary in relation to more significant morphogenetic movements: the augmen-

tation of free surfaces, stretching of cellular layers, invagination by folding, regional displacement of groups' (Deleuze 1994: 214). These transformations cannot be properly understood in metric terms, as 'the destiny and achievement of the embryo is to live the unliveable, to sustain forced movements of a scope which would break any skeleton or tear ligaments' (215). The claim here is therefore that intensity operates topologically, and hence is not determined in terms of a uniform metric.<sup>9</sup> Second, to talk about intensive space is in fact a simplification which emerges quite naturally from the reference to topology. The development of the embryo could equally be understood as a process, with the emergence of the 'differential rhythms' that characterise the organism. In fact, the intensive is neither purely spatial nor temporal, and these two terms can only be separated once explicated in extensity: 'the distinction is obviously relative, for it is clear that the dynamism is simultaneously temporal and spatial – in other words, spatio-temporal . . . The duality does not exist in the process of actualisation itself, but only in its outcome, in the actual terms' (217).

Deleuze provides a model for how to think the relation between metric and non-metric spaces with an example from mathematics. We can begin by taking the series of cardinal numbers, 1, 2, 3, . . . Now, we can note that in some cases, such as 7 divided by 5, we can only divide this sequence of numbers by introducing a further set of numbers: the fractions. These allow us to take a difference which cannot be resolved and resolve it in a new domain. We can in turn discover within the domain of fractions a set of numbers, namely the irrational numbers, that cannot be determined within the domain of fractions, but can be determined, once again, in their own domain. We have seen briefly that the space of intensive transformations cannot be understood in terms of precise measurements, but rather is defined by topological transformations. Deleuze notes that what makes the arithmetical relations within the series of natural numbers possible, and similarly measurement within space, is that both of these presuppose a basic metric unit between elements. Just as there is a difference in natural numbers that cannot be resolved without the introduction of a new series, Deleuze asks if there is a series that is itself resolved into the natural numbers, and argues that this series is the ordinal numbers (first, second, third). Here, we have a series which contains an order, but without the idea of a shared metric (the difference between first and second does not need to be the same as that between second and third). Deleuze takes this lack of a metric to explain how the genesis of systems can involve transformations that seem impossible from the point of view of fully constituted systems.

As well as understanding the genesis of space from a field which is indeterminate from the perspective of Euclidean space, Deleuze also argues that the notion of properties as determinations is secondary to processes. We have just seen that intensive space involves a difference that cannot be reduced to an identity except by explicating it in an extensive space. Deleuze takes as his model temperature, which is not a quality, but rather a measure of the difference in heat between different bodies. As such, rather than a self-identical quality, temperature is a difference. Deleuze generalises from this to argue that ‘qualities are signs which flash across the interval of a difference’ (1994: 223), and thus that qualities are a misrepresentation of an inherently processual model of the world. As such, qualities are a way of representing in extensity something that cannot be given in extensity. For Deleuze, therefore, Kant fails to recognise that synthesis can operate in a manner that constitutes the basic elements of extensity and quality, rather than simply operating through a transposition of them. Before looking at the implications of this model, I want to turn to Merleau-Ponty’s model of asymmetrical synthesis.

### **Merleau-Ponty’s Asymmetrical Synthesis**

At the heart of Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms of Kant is a similar recognition that there is a necessary moment of indeterminacy to the world. Merleau-Ponty claims that we tend to fall prey to what he calls the ‘experience error’, wherein ‘we immediately assume that what we know to exist among things is also in our perception of them’ (2012: 5). As such, we tend to attribute the kind of complete determination we think applies to objects to our field of perception itself:

Through optics and geometry we construct the fragment of the world whose image can, at any moment, form upon our retina. Anything outside of this perimeter – not reflecting upon any sensitive surface – no more acts upon our vision than does light falling upon our closed eyes. We ought to thus perceive a sharply delimited segment of the world, surrounded by a black zone, filled with qualities without any lacunae, and subtended by determinate size relations like those existing upon the retina. But experience offers nothing of the sort, and we will never understand what a visual field is by beginning from the world. Even if it is possible to trace a perimeter around vision by beginning at the centre and gradually approaching lateral stimuli, the results of such a measurement nonetheless vary from one moment to the next, and the precise moment at which a previously seen stimulus ceases to be seen can never be identified. The region surrounding

the visual field is not easy to describe, but it is certainly neither black nor grey. (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 6)

As Merleau-Ponty notes, given that our understanding of the world is itself grounded in perception, there is a complex circularity in understanding the nature of perception in terms of a field of objects, since perception is the way in which we encounter those objects in the first place.

Merleau-Ponty argues that this claim about the borders of our visual field is not an accidental aspect of our perception, but rather is tied to the fundamental nature of perception itself. If perception is understood on the model of the world, then it is a short step to seeing the basic unit of perception as being the correlate of a point on the retina, effectively the kind of atomic sense-datum we find in Hume's empiricism. Merleau-Ponty instead argues that '[a] figure against a background is the most basic perceptual figure that can be given' (2012: 4). Now, by this he does not simply mean that our perception is contextual but that perception has a necessarily complex structure which involves the interrelation of a moment of determinacy and one of indeterminacy. This immediately pushes Merleau-Ponty's account of perception away from the notion that synthesis involves the interrelation of determinate elements. Rather, for Merleau-Ponty, perception is an autochthonous mode of organisation. As such, perception, and with it the world, involves the interplay of figure and background, which highlights its inherently perspectival nature. When we look at extensity, according to Merleau-Ponty, we cannot understand how basic categories such as up and down are to be understood without presupposing a perspectival engagement with the world. The key idea here is that attending to the world involves a constitution of categories, rather than simply an inessential indeterminacy that belongs purely to perception itself. Merleau-Ponty writes: 'the act of attention is . . . at least rooted in the life of consciousness, and we can finally understand that it emerges from its indifferent freedom to give itself a present object. The passage from the indeterminate to the determinate, this continuous taking up again of its own history in the unity of a new sense, is thought itself' (33). Here, then, just as the flash of lightning distinguishes itself from its background without the background itself becoming distinguished, we find for Merleau-Ponty that the figure emerges from a field of indeterminacy without itself determining its constituting field. 'Psychological atomism is but a particular case of a more general prejudice: the unquestioned belief in determinate being and in the world' (510).

## Asymmetrical Synthesis

Merleau-Ponty is not mentioned in the long bibliography at the end of *Difference and Repetition*, and is barely mentioned within the text itself. Nonetheless, we find that Deleuze's account of the three syntheses in chapter five of *Difference and Repetition* makes clear the importance of Merleau-Ponty's work for Deleuze. Here, the concern is with space rather than time, but 'we should not be surprised that the pure spatial syntheses repeat the temporal syntheses previously specified' (Deleuze 1994: 230). In the syntheses of time, we begin with the structure of habit and discover that habit could only be understood in terms of an ontologically prior field of memory. Here, Deleuze begins with three oppositions: 'up and down, the right and the left, and the figure and the ground' (229, translation modified).<sup>10</sup> Each of these oppositions is dealt with in detail by Merleau-Ponty in relation to his discussion of extensity, and in each case he argues that the opposition can only be properly understood if we assume that our relation to space is perspectival. As such, we can see here Deleuze recognising Merleau-Ponty as a precursor, implicitly arguing that Merleau-Ponty's discussion of perspective can be understood as an analysis of intensity in another element.

So how do these asymmetrical syntheses differ from the symmetrical synthesis of Kant's philosophy? Let us return to the six characteristics of the symmetrical synthesis, and see how they compare to those of the asymmetrical synthesis.

First, as we saw, the symmetrical synthesis involves a combination of ready-made representations. Now, Kant's account is constitutive of experience, in that the transcendental unity of apperception is outside of time. As such, it is a synthesis of constitution from nowhere in that it precedes space and time, and it operates in terms of ready-made elements. For Deleuze, synthesis operates between two levels, and is a continuous process of communication between these two levels: 'In reality, the individual can only be contemporaneous with its individuation, and individuation, contemporaneous with the principle: the principle must be truly genetic, and not simply a principle of reflection. Also, the individual is not just a result, but an *environment* of individuation' (Deleuze 2004: 86). This process of movement between intensity and extensity is precisely what constituted the qualities taken up by representation, not as states, but rather themselves as processes of difference. For Merleau-Ponty too, we saw that through the process of attention we did not simply have the illumination of the world, but rather the constitution of properties. Just as for Deleuze synthesis is a continual process of

generation, for Merleau-Ponty synthesis operates by transition from one perspective to the next, providing an account of constitution without presupposing a moment outside of time.

Second, we saw that symmetrical synthesis operated in terms of determinate properties. As we have seen, for Deleuze, synthesis is instead constitutive of properties, as properties are a well-founded illusion generated by intensive processes of difference. For Merleau-Ponty too, the key element in Kant's account, the representation, is a falsification of our notion of perspectival experience. For Kant, perception occurs through the organisation of representations in relation to the concept of an object. For Merleau-Ponty, while we might say that synthesis operates through the movement between perspectives, in fact this characterisation of a movement between perspectives is an artifice of our reflection on the constitution of experience. Instead, perspectives are not individuated, and 'the diversity of points of view is only suspected through an imperceptible slippage, or through a certain "indeterminacy" of the appearance' (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 344). Perspectivism here operates in a smooth space of transition that carries with it the unquantifiable nature of the intensive.

Third, we saw that for Kant synthesis required the notion of a self to organise experience, by analogy with judgement, which involves the manipulation of representations by a subject. Once we see experience itself as a process, we open up the possibility of synthesis giving rise to the subject, rather than being a consequence of it. For Deleuze, 'time itself unfolds . . . instead of things unfolding within it' (1994: 88). In this sense, the self for Deleuze is an organisation of intensity into a set of rhythms and differences that in turn determine it with particular characteristics. What we normally take to be the self is merely the representational reflection on this process of individuation: 'Psychology regards it as established that the self cannot contemplate itself. This, however, is not the question. The question is whether or not the self itself is a contemplation, whether it is not in itself a contemplation, and whether we can learn, form behaviour and form ourselves other than through contemplation' (73). We find a similar claim in Merleau-Ponty's work, where perception constitutes the subject and object. This is the meaning of his famous claim of the primacy of perception:

[Bergson] evokes, beyond the 'point of view of the object' and the 'point of view of the subject', a common nucleus which is the 'winding' [*serpente-ment*], being as a winding (what I called 'modulation of the being in the world'). It is necessary to make understood how that (or any *Gestalt*) is a perception 'being formed in the things'. This is still only an approximative

expression, in the subject-object language (Wahl, Bergson) of what there is to be said. That is, that the things have us, and that it is not we who have the things. (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 194)

Fourth, and as a direct consequence of rejecting the notions of self, determination and the ready-made, we open up the possibility of synthesis that doesn't operate in terms of judgement. 'Here there is, prior to objective relations, a perceptual syntax that is articulated according to its own rules: the breaking up of previous relations and the establishing of new ones – judgment – only express the outcome of this deep operation and are its final report' (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 38).

Fifth, rejecting judgement involves rejecting the ideal of God. As we saw, God is the model of complete determination for Kant. As such, in rejecting complete determination, we reject the notion that there could be a view from nowhere. 'Intellectualism and empiricism do not give us an account of the human experience of the world; they say of human experience what God might think of the world' (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 266–7). 'The oneness and identity of the divine substance are in truth the only guarantee of a unique and identical Self, and God is retained so long as the Self is preserved' (Deleuze 1994: 58).

When we take these claims together, we find an account of synthesis that captures the particularity of our relationship with the world. We no longer need to understand constitution in terms of judgement, but can instead see it in terms of the genesis of a field of determinations from a field that, in respect to them, remains indeterminate.

## Conclusion

I want to conclude this chapter by considering two questions. First, why does Kant fall into the errors that he does? And second, how do we distinguish Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze? The response to the first question is that it is by understanding time in terms of moments that we fall into error, and that so long as we understand synthesis to operate in relation to judgement, we cannot help but fall into this error. Time cannot be reconstituted once it has been broken up into discrete atomic elements. 'It thinks it can comprehend our natal bond with the world only by *undoing* it in order to *remake* it, only by constituting it, by fabricating it' (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 32). The ultimate implication of this for both Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty is that traditional accounts of synthesis are unable to explain our experience within time without recourse to paradox. Merleau-Ponty puts the point as follows:

The definition of time, which is implicit in the comparisons made by common sense and which could be formulated as ‘a succession of nows’, does not merely commit the error of treating the past and the future as presents: it is in fact inconsistent since it destroys the very notion of the ‘now’ and the very notion of succession. (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 435)

Deleuze extends this point in *Difference and Repetition*, where he also develops a series of paradoxes that emerge from attempting to constitute time through a succession of nows: ‘It is futile to try to reconstitute the past from the presents between which it is trapped, either the present which it was, or the one in relation to which it is now past’ (1994: 81).<sup>11</sup>

Both Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty hold that the paradoxes within the representation of synthesis lead us to recognise the unsustainability of traditional accounts of synthesis. Judgement fails to explain constitution, and instead ‘prevents the emergence of any new mode of existence. For the latter creates itself through its own forces, that is, through the forces it is able to harness, and is valid in and of itself inasmuch as it brings the new combination into existence’ (Deleuze 1998: 135). Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty recognise that synthesis does not have to be understood as categorial synthesis, and so they are able to develop an alternative model of the structure of the world which allows us to understand it as indeterminate, but not as thereby indifferent. How do their alternative accounts differ? Both see asymmetrical syntheses as operating between determinacy and indeterminacy, but perhaps the fundamental difference lies in the interrelation between these fields. For Deleuze, synthesis happens between two levels, with each being complete, even if it is not whole.<sup>12</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, determination and the indeterminate are related in an asymmetrical intertwining that holds both on the same plane. We will leave a discussion of how we distinguish between these models for a later work.

## Notes

1. For both, transcendental illusion is a key methodological discovery that is not taken far enough by Kant himself. Merleau-Ponty explicitly takes Kant’s account of the antinomies into his own methodology, noting that ‘One of Kant’s discoveries, whose consequences we have not yet fully grasped, is that all our experience of the world is throughout a tissue of concepts which lead to irreducible contradictions if we attempt to take them in an absolute sense or transfer them into pure being, and that they nevertheless found the structure of all our phenomena, of everything which is for us. It would take too long to show (and besides it is well known) that Kantian philosophy itself failed to utilise this principle fully and that both its investigation of experience and its critique of dogmatism remained incomplete’ (1964: 18–19). Deleuze takes

- Kant's discovery of the paralogisms to be likewise both pivotal but underexploited by Kant (Deleuze 1994: 86).
2. Kant distances himself from the 'intellectualised appearances' (1929: A271/B327) of Leibniz's account of space and time. For the radicality of Kant's departure from prior philosophers (and Plato in particular), see Deleuze 1978.
  3. See Longuenesse 2001: 63–4 for her account of the interrelation of the understanding and imagination.
  4. 'Thus, the positing [position] of a single object in the full sense of the word requires the composition [or co-positing] of all of these experiences in a single, polythetic act. Therein it exceeds perceptual experience and the synthesis of horizons – just as the notion of a universe (a completed and explicit totality where relations would be reciprocally determined) exceeds the notion of a world (an open and indefinite multiplicity where relations are reciprocally implicated). I take flight from my experience and I pass over to the idea. Like the object, the idea claims to be the same for everyone, valid for all times and for all places, and the individuation of the object at an objective point of time and space appears, in the end, as the expression of a universal positing power' (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 73–4).
  5. Deleuze sees a sedentary distribution as a set of transcendental claims about the rules for understanding how experience is organised. The assumptions behind sedentary distributions are discussed in more detail in chapter three of *Difference and Repetition*. See Williams 2004: 65–7; Somers-Hall 2012: 38–42 for more on the interrelation of sedentary and nomadic distributions.
  6. Cf., for instance, Deleuze 1994: 52.
  7. While Kant posits the transcendental ideal of God as a condition for determination, it is important also to recognise that Kant breaks with what Allison calls the 'theocentric' model of thought that we find in pre-Kantian metaphysics (cf. Allison 2004: 27–34). He does so by positing a difference between the intuitive thought of an infinite being and the discursive thought of a finite being. For an analysis of the ambivalences this generates in Merleau-Ponty's reading of Kant, see Somers-Hall 2019.
  8. Deleuze defines traditional metaphysics and transcendental philosophy as holding to the claim that one must have 'either an undifferentiated ground, a groundlessness, formless nonbeing, or an abyss without differences and without properties, or a supremely individuated Being and an intensely personalized form' (1990: 106). This is in effect once again the claim that all determination must related to a central unity, with the only alternative being a lack of determination (in effect, either being or nothingness). Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty both seek a new form of thinking that will be adequate to thinking the genesis of form itself.
  9. Deleuze is here breaking with much of the philosophical tradition by seeing time as independent of measure. He will argue that, from Plato, time has been understood simply as the medium through which causal or logical relations are expressed, such as in Plato's notion of the world as the 'moving image of eternity', or Leibniz's account of well-founded phenomena. Deleuze calls this notion of intensity separated from measure the pure form of time. For Deleuze, it is Kant who inaugurates a break with the metaphysical tradition by determining time independently of rational categories. While he recognises this difference in kind, Kant goes wrong by understanding time as purely passive rather than generative. See Somers-Hall 2011.
  10. Patton here translates *le haut et le bas* as 'high and low', which obscures the connection with Merleau-Ponty's discussion of up and down in the *Phenomenology of Perception*.

11. Cf. Ansell-Pearson 2001: 185–91 for a discussion of these paradoxes.  
 12. Deleuze takes this distinction from Descartes. Cf. Deleuze 1994: 209.

## References

- Allison, H. (2004), *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ansell-Pearson, K. (2001) *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual*, London: Routledge.
- Deleuze, G. (1978), 'Cours Vincennes: Synthesis and Time', trans. Melissa McMahon, at <<https://www.webdeleuze.com/textes/66>>.
- Deleuze, G. (1990), *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, London: Athlone Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1994), *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1998), 'To Have Done with Judgment', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, London: Verso.
- Deleuze, G. (2004), 'On Gilbert Simondon', in *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953–1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Mike Taormina, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Kant, I. (1929), *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, London: Macmillan.
- Longuenesse, B. (2001), *Kant and the Capacity to Judge: Sensibility and Discursivity in the Transcendental Analytic of the Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Charles T. Wolf, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964), 'The Primacy of Perception', in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968), *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012), *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Somers-Hall, H. (2011), 'Time Out of Joint: Hamlet and the Pure Form of Time', *Deleuze Studies*, 5 (supplement): 56–76.
- Somers-Hall, H. (2012), *Deleuze's Difference and Repetition: An Edinburgh Philosophical Guide*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Somers-Hall, H. (2019), 'Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Kant's Transcendental Idealism', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 57 (1): 103–31.
- Williams, J. (2004), *Deleuze's Difference and Repetition: A Critical Introduction and Guide*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.