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Sebastian Olma is finishing a PhD on intensive capitalism at Goldsmiths College. He lives in Amsterdam.

Event

Mariam Fraser

An event is not just something that happens. As a philosophical concept, it exists in relation to a specific set of problems, including the problem of how to conceive of modes of individuation that pertain not to being, or to essences and representation, but to becoming and effectivity. Event-thinking can be understood to be part of an anti-reductionist project that seeks to describe the relations between actual things, bodies and happenings, and the independent reality of these events in themselves. It is thus an especially relevant concept with regards to the problematization of knowledge, and in particular to the philosophy of science. The concept of the event brings with it implications for (among other things): the relation between language and the world; conceptions of substance and materiality; ethics.

The event preoccupied the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze for much of his career, during which time he 'renew[ed] and recreat[ed] a metaphysical tradition that extends from the Stoics through Leibniz to Bergson and Whitehead' (Patton, 1996: 12). From the Stoics, Deleuze distinguishes between two kinds of entities. On the one hand there are bodies which exist in space and in time (in the present) with their corresponding 'states of affairs', while on the other there are incorporeal beings or transformations. Incorporeal beings, Deleuze (2004: 7) writes, 'are not things or facts, but events. We cannot say that they exist, but rather that they subsist or inhere'. They subsist or inhere, for example, in the expressed of the proposition, which Deleuze (2004: 22) calls sense, that is, 'an incorporeal, complex, and irreducible entity, at the surface of things, a pure event'.

In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze adds a fourth dimension to the three generally agreed upon relations of the proposition. These three are: denotation, which is the relation of the proposition to an external state of affairs; manifestation, which is the relation of the proposition to the person who speaks and expresses themselves; and signification, which is the relation of the word to universal or general concepts (Deleuze, 2004: 16–18). Unlike the circle which characterises the proposition – '[f]rom denotation to manifestation, then to signification, but also from signification to manifestation and to denotation' (2004: 20) – Deleuze argues that sense should be understood as the boundary between propositions and things, that it is 'the coexistence of two sides without thickness' (2004: 25). Sense subsists in the proposition but it does not merge with it, nor with the state of affairs or the quality which the proposition denotes: 'It is this *aliquid* at once extra-Being and inherence, that is, this minimum of being which befits inherences' (2004: 25). Significantly, Deleuze's use of the Stoic conception of the event enables the relation between language and the world to be reconfigured: denotation and manifestation do not found language, but are rather made possible with it, and what renders language

possible is the event. Indeed, in *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze argues that language, when it operates actively and creatively (as it does in some literature), not only expresses but also extends the transformative power of an event.

For Deleuze, the relation of events to states of affairs is not that of the possible to the real, but of the virtual to the actual. The world is actual-virtual, and as such maintains the power of virtuality; the capacity of a thing to become differently. This point is particularly well expressed by the infinitive verb, which has two dimensions: on the one hand it is virtual and incorporeal, it is a potentiality or becoming, while on the other hand it indicates a substantive relation to a state of affairs which, as noted above, takes place in a physical time characterized by succession. This is why the infinitive is so important to Deleuze's conception of the event. It indicates that an event is not bound to a particular space and time, but may be experienced whenever and wherever it is actualized anew. It is because an event can be actualized in multiple ways that it retains an openness to re-inventions (or re-eventalizations). The concept of the event, informed by the concept of the virtual, not only contributes to an explanation of the relations between things therefore, but also accounts for the inexhaustible reserve or excess that produces novelty.

Deleuze's (1995: 160) problematizaton of things is especially clearly laid out in *The Fold* (2001) in which he turns to (or perhaps more accurately, inhabits) the work of Leibniz and Whitehead. Both Leibniz and Whitehead rejected substance as the basic metaphysical category and chose instead to privilege continuity. Theirs is not the continuity of rectilinear tracks or of lines that could dissolve into independent points however, but of an infinite series of individuated monads (Leibniz) or of actual entities or occasions, coalitions of prehensions (Whitehead). Although there are significant conceptual differences between monadic and prehensive units, they nevertheless share one striking feature. In each, all the elements in the same world are in contact with or connected to each other; there are no gaps, and there is no outside. This challenge to absolute theories of time, space and matter, and the role of the event in posing that challenge, finds special relevance with regards to the philosophy of science and in particular to recent developments in contemporary social science studies of science in which there has been renewed interest in the work of Alfred North Whitehead (Barry, 2005; Haraway, 1997: 146–7; Latour, 2004; Stengers, 2002). It is worth pausing here briefly therefore to consider Whitehead's take on the event and how both Deleuze and Whitehead's work has influenced at least one contemporary philosopher of science, Isabelle Stengers, before returning to the main thesis of (and problems with) *The Fold*.

For Whitehead (1920), the recourse to time and space as a means of unifying nature – for example the claim that the redness of the fire and the agitation of the molecules occur at the same time and in the same space – cannot suffice as an explanation, for it demands that time and space be apprehended independently of the events that occur *in* time, or of the objects that *occupy* space. The concepts of time and space cannot therefore provide a metaphysical starting point. Whitehead argues instead that they (along with subjects and objects) are abstractions, reified entities that are *to be* explained by the contingent, changing, but nevertheless concrete elements and events from which they are abstracted. In contrast to the notion that time is an ordered succession of instants without duration and that space is a system of points without extension, Whitehead suggests that duration is the field of the event: points and instants, spatial and temporal divisibility and extensiveness, are the 'properties' of a duration. Duration 'is the old-fashioned "present state of the world"' (Whitehead, 1978: 320). Time is a succession of durations, and it is by 'becoming temporal' that a duration incurs the realization of an enduring object (Whitehead, 1985: 159). In short, an event (a concert, or a sound, or a molecule) does not move *through* time and space and nor do changes occur *in* space and time. Instead, motion and change are attributable to the differences between successive events, each with their own durations. 'There is a becoming of continuity', Whitehead (1978: 35) writes, 'but no continuity of becoming'.

There are undoubtedly some points of resonance between Deleuze's understanding of sense as 'aliquid' – as both extra-Being and inherence – and Whitehead's concept of an eternal object. Eternal objects, for Whitehead, are 'the pure potentials of the universe' (1978: 149). They can be qualities, such as colours or sounds, or figures, like pyramids. As such, they come close to being universals – 'though not quite', Whitehead adds (1978: 48). The point in the context of Whitehead's work is that eternal objects are neither delusions nor secondary qualities (like the red of the fire) that a mind *mistakenly* perceives to be an attribute of matter. On the contrary, the perceiver of the colour red is also part of (is enfolded into) the event. Indeed Whitehead conceives of each 'perceiver' or element in an event to be a relation, or rather a prehension, which is by definition constituted by its prehension of and by other prehensions in a nexus (an event). Thus, as Deleuze (2001: 78) explains, '[t]he eye is a

prehension of light' and 'seeing' is an achievement conditioned by the event. Nevertheless, although prehending and being prehended are important dimensions of process, they are not sufficient (they do not deliver meaning) in themselves. It is the manner in which prehensions are received – their 'subjective form' – that shapes the character of the entity: '*how* an actual entity *becomes*', Whitehead (1978: 23) writes, 'constitutes *what* that actual entity *is*'. The singularity of an event is based not simply on the *coming* together of prehensions therefore, but on their *becoming* together in a particular way. The question as to whether an entity – a scientific artefact or work of art for example – is 'real' or whether it is a 'representation' is thus displaced in favour of the question as to what it can do. What does *this* particular set of relations and *this* specific mode of belonging-together problematize?

Although the contemporary Belgian philosopher of science, Isabelle Stengers, does not conceive of an event in exactly the sense that Deleuze and Whitehead do, her understanding of it is certainly informed by a similar interest in problems. For Stengers, a scientific experiment is an event only if it makes a difference between a before and an after, that is, if it is able to invent new practices, and new ways of thinking and feeling about a problem. This is precisely why Stengers puts modern science under the sign of the event, for by inventing 'the power to confer on things the power of conferring on the experimenter the power to speak in their name' (2000: 88) a new relation between fact and fiction was introduced. The event constitutes one of the most important and valuable aspects of Stengers' approach to science, because it enables her to respect the singularity of modern science without confirming its privilege on this basis. For although the event is the creator of difference, it does not identify in advance for whom it will make a difference, or in what way. It is not the bearer of signification. Instead, '[t]he scope of the event is part of its effects, of the problem posed in the future it creates' (Stengers 2000: 66). *All* those who are touched by an event define and are defined by it, whether they align themselves to it or oppose it. Not only does the event have no privileged representative therefore (science is not the domain of scientists alone), it is also impossible for any participant in an event, by definition, to stand outside of it and to pass judgement on it, or to explain it *away* with reference to a history, culture or geographical area. As in Deleuze and Whitehead's conception of an event, this is an understanding that foregrounds contingency, 'without basing contingency on some specific ontological foundation (such as language,

discourse, the body, or materiality)' (Mackenzie, 2005: 9).

In *The Fold* Deleuze draws on Leibniz and Whitehead in order to emphasize the constant enfolding, unfolding, and refolding of matter, time and space. 'The unit of matter,' he (2001: 6) writes, 'the smallest element of the labyrinth, is the fold, not the point'. In this way, Deleuze delivers a profound blow to any philosophy that rests on a distinction between the knowing subject and the object for knowledge. In Deleuze's 'objectless knowledge' (Badiou, 1994: 67), the object refers not to a spatialized relation of form-matter, but to a *temporal* modulation, a variation, in a continuum. Correlatively, the subject, which also represents variation, is a 'point of view'. This does not mean that the subject 'has' a point of view (which would imply a pre-given subject), or that the truth varies from subject to subject (which would imply that the truth is relative), but rather that the point of view is 'the condition in which the truth of a variation appears to the subject' (Deleuze, 2001: 20). For Deleuze, truth is variation. And, as an immanent inflection of the continuous, the event is the condition of truth, the condition of what is possible to be true in any local situation (thus the opposite of the truth, in Deleuze's account, is not the false but the absurd, or that which is neither true nor false). Which is precisely the problem for Alain Badiou. The event, understood by Deleuze as that which emerges out of an ontological univocity, 'as what singularizes continuity in each of its local folds' (Badiou, 1994: 56), is too much *of* the world, is so much a part of the world, in fact, that Badiou feels obliged to call its singularity into question: how is it possible to distinguish an event from a fact if 'everything is event'? Deleuze's concept of the fold is so profoundly antiextensional, Badiou argues, so labyrinthine and directly qualitative, that he is unable to account for the singularity of an event or rupture at all.

Perhaps Deleuze's contribution to event-thinking should ultimately be judged by the extent to which he was able to invent concepts that affirm and extend events. This, he argues in *What is Philosophy?* (with Guattari, 1994), is the role of philosophy itself: 'There is a dignity of the event that has always been inseparable from philosophy as *amor fati*: being equal to the event, or becoming the offspring of one's own events' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 158). Being equal to the event means willing the event in a way that involves neither resignation nor *ressentiment*, that is affirmative, that transforms the quality of the will itself. In this *ethical* task, Deleuze owes as much to Neitzsche as he does to the Stoics. Indeed in this context, Philip Goodchild (1996: 53) argues

that the eternal return should be understood 'not [as] a theory of time, but [as] a technique for living the event'. Less ambitiously however, one might argue that Deleuze's conception of the event – and particularly his emphasis on the problem, and on the way that the problem, which is conditioned by the event, will always be different and irreducible to the solutions it engenders (just as an event always exceeds the bodies in which it is actualized) – offers a practical orientation for the way that ethics itself, including Deleuze's own ethics, might be judged. That is: 'less by the types of solutions that are being proposed for the problems than by the way in which the positioning of the problem and the solutions proposed situate and involve those to whom they are addressed' (Stengers with Ralet, 1997: 221–2). This does not involve inventive problem-solving. It involves inventive problem-making.

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Mariam Fraser is a senior lecturer in Sociology at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Her research focuses on facts, values, ethics and process, especially in relation to science and bioethics.