



## Multiplicity

The concept of multiplicity has attained prominence largely through the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995). Deleuze developed the concept in his book *Bergsonism* and explored its political ramifications most relentlessly with Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. A multiplicity is an entity that originates from a folding or twisting of simple elements. Like a sand dune, a multiplicity is in constant flux, though it attains some consistency for a short or long duration. A multiplicity has porous boundaries and is defined provisionally by its variations and dimensions. Deleuze and Guattari redefine as multiplicities many of the key terms of Western political theory—including race, class, gender, language, state, society, person, and party. Their method aims to render political thinking more nuanced and generous toward difference.

Deleuze employs the term *multiplicity* as part of his broader project to overturn Platonism. Human cognition, according to Deleuze and his predecessors Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson, simplifies the world of intuition. This often benefits human survival and flourishing. It ensures, for instance, that humans can trust that an “apple” contains good nutrition even though humans only ever encounter *this* or *that* apple. Platonism codifies the common sense belief that human concepts match up with nature’s articulations. Plato posited a universe of the One and the Multiple in which humans perceive inferior copies of perfect ideas. The doctrine reassures humanity that orderly patterns transcend the world of manifest difference. Modern philosophy’s task, for Deleuze, is to break from the Platonic cast of mind and grasp multiplicities in their singularity. A multiplicity is neither a copy of a model nor a fragment of a higher totality, but a purely unique event. The concept helps humans conceive and appreciate a world where things creatively evolve to form new and surprising assemblages.

Deleuze differentiates two types of multiplicity: one that aligns with Platonic metaphysics, science, and common sense, and another that intuits a deeper reality. Deleuze designates the first type of multiplicity quantitative or numerical. Quantitative multiplicities, most simply, can be counted. They are actual, objective, and extensive; are represented in space; possess an identity; and differ in degree from one another. The intellect, for example, adds up the apples in a barrel, confident that they are fundamentally the same despite differences in size, color, ripeness, and so forth. The other type of multiplicity Deleuze denotes qualitative and continuous. Qualitative multiplicities, such as a human mood, cannot properly be counted. They are virtual, subjective, and intensive; are experienced in lived time; and differ in kind from one another. Many of the dichotomies that recur throughout Deleuze’s philosophy—arboreal and rhizomatic, molar and molecular, the major and the minor, the organism and the Body without Organs—aim to dive beneath surface appearances to capture the elusive singularity of each society, language, politics, or individual. Deleuze emphasizes that the two multiplicities coexist and interpenetrate. Each type of multiplicity captures a side of being and perception. Science accurately portrays one side of reality—the one that coheres into regular patterns that can be observed and catalogued. Philosophy’s role, however, is to tailor concepts for purely unique events.

The concept of multiplicity reconfigures the ancient dispute between reason and poetry. Quantitative multiplicities can be captured through logical, mathematical, or scientific propositions. Qualitative multiplicities require a broader palette to color in the nuance of each thing, and here, philosophy forms alliances with painters, authors, directors, or sculptors. Philosophers create concepts that align with artistic percepts. That is one reason that Deleuze cites artists such as Virginia Wolff or Marcel Proust. When Wolff experiences herself as a school of fish, she portrays the lived sensation of being a qualitative multiplicity open to powers and affects circulating in the universe. Deleuze constructs philosophical concepts, such as the virtual, to describe the source of animal-becomings that permeate our subjectivity. For Deleuze, philosophers should investigate the world using the tools of both reason (quantitative multiplicities) and poetry (qualitative multiplicities).

Politically, the concept of multiplicity draws attention to minority-becomings. Majorities are quantitative multiplicities; the actors, positions, and votes are discrete and perceptible. Minorities can also be quantitative multiplicities, if their properties are clear and distinct. Minority-becomings, however, are qualitative multiplicities. They constitute fuzzy sets that elude the standards of the majority or minorities. Deleuze acknowledges that politics is always composed of a majority, minorities, and minority-becomings. Democracy requires the governance of majorities, but a politics of difference also welcomes and respects minority-becomings, that is, unfamiliar ideas, actors, positions, practices, and parties. The politics of multiplicity radicalizes liberalism by extending receptive generosity toward elements that perplex or transform social norms.

The example of gender may illustrate the stakes of Deleuze’s project. Male and female are quantitative multiplicities, recognized by biological distinctions and assigned cultural roles and norms. Within the realms of

Platonism, science, and common sense, this binary aggregate is real and corresponds to a natural division. Deleuze supports the feminist project to make females, a "minority," equal to men. Yet Deleuze also thinks that this duality conceals a great deal of gender's complexity. Gender is a qualitative multiplicity that enfolds genetic variation, parenting styles, social roles, cultural norms, charismatic friends, music, and public policy. Beneath the crude binary of male and female flow a plurality of tiny sexes. A politics of multiplicity may help these virtual sexes cross the threshold into actuality in such fields as family law, athletic competition, economic justice, and cultural representation. A politics of multiplicity also instills hope that political bodies can be transformed through careful chiseling of their borders.

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## Further Readings

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