

Using Social Theory: Thinking Through Research

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Using Social Theory

Thinking Through Research

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philosophical work that does, in its own way, broach some of these themes, and each chapter pulls out the implications of those philosophies for the kinds of question a research project might ask.

Each chapter starts off, at least, with that notion of a question being a form of words. The first chapter, which brings parts of Rorty's and Foucault's work into conversation, suggests that questions, and answers, do indeed have to be framed in words, in language, in human systems of understanding. Questions are produced through language; they have to be formulated through words and can only be answered by words. The second chapter, however, explores the work of two philosophers who challenge the assumption that, as Rorty claims, 'language goes all the way down'. Deleuze and Derrida suggest, in contrast, that the most productive questioning might happen as a consequence of events that have little to do with language. Inspiration and creativity, they suggest, depend more on the contingency and play of everyday life, a life which far exceeds the limits of language. As a consequence, their take on questions suggests that they are less forms of words and more a mode of living, a mode which is open and receptive to the richness and unpredictability of living in the world. Chapter 3 looks at how just one aspect of this richness might also affect the practice of questioning.

Working with Irigaray and Grosz, it explores how human bodies may force certain kinds of questioning on us. Again, this questioning is not confined entirely to the linguistic; and it also problematizes the kinds of answer it invites.

All of this philosophical work, different as it is in so many ways, displaces the idea that the research question is a simple starting point. In its demand that we need to think about our questions – their structure, their medium, their origin – these philosophies suggest that research questions are made and not found; they are generated and not discovered. The formulation of a research question is itself a process in which philosophical considerations must play a part. Part I demonstrates how philosophies entail a range of consequences for the process of doing research and how we ask research questions.

A question of language

John Allen

Introduction

At an early stage of your research project, at a welcome moment or not, someone is likely to ask you what your research is all about. What exactly, you hear them say, is the question (or questions) that you hope to answer through your work? Now, even if your plans are still rather vague, you will be expected to give an answer of sorts. You will have had some thoughts on this anyway, so at least you will be able to offer a tentative answer or provide a first stab at a research question. But that does not always suppress the doubt – well not for me at least – that last week's question, which seemed so apt at the time, is now beginning to look a little unfocused, woolly even, as new angles emerge and fresh questions take shape in your mind. Perhaps that is just the way things are: getting to grips with a research question, questioning the question, playing with words are simply part of the *process of doing* research. Or rather, that is what it feels like at the beginning.

Much of this chapter is given over to this moment in the research process: what does it mean, or what does it take, to formulate a research question? For my part, the formulation of a research question is perhaps best thought about as a *task* to be achieved, something that you have to work at which, like anything that you have to craft or fashion, takes more than one attempt. Looked at in this way, the effort that you put in is one of reflection, revision and iteration, as you attempt to refine a research question which conveys all that you hope to achieve or rather all that you hope to say. I stress this process of crafting a question because, like it or not, others will judge your research efforts both by the questions that you pose and by the answers that you give.

In the next section, I shall explore what it means to come up with a research question, not in the 'how to do it' mould, but rather to reflect upon the process of generating a question and what we take the beginning point to be. For, at the very start, it sometimes seems that there is little 'out there' in the world that helps us to choose between different formulations and so we are thrown back upon our own linguistic devices, almost as if the whole process were some kind of elaborate word game. Well, in fact, some philosophers would tell us that this is hardly surprising, given that

language is all that we have to work with, in so far as we cannot step outside it to 'know' the world 'as it really is'. We are, it would seem, caught up in language and the very process of arriving at a research question obviously takes place within language. In a later section ('Questions are produced, not found'), I outline two philosophical standpoints which, in rather different ways, force you to address this possibility: that you cannot get in between language and the world to come up with a better research question.

The first position draws upon the work of Richard Rorty, a contemporary North American philosophical pragmatist, and the second draws upon the early writings of Michel Foucault, a French philosopher and historian writing in the late twentieth century. Where Rorty remains ever hopeful about the prospect of generating new questions, new vocabularies that allow us to describe things in ways which enable us to do things we could not do before, Foucault wants to remind us that our discourses, what has been already said, limit what it is possible to ask and blind us from asking new kinds of question. Both accounts, in their own way, oblige us to think through what is involved in the formulation of a research question where there is no means apparent other than language to access the world.

Finally, I draw out the consequences of this philosophical position for the process of research, before linking forward to ways other than language through which you as researchers encounter the world. First, though, I want to start from what is hopefully a familiar position: a state of curiosity.

A research question: what is it? where to begin?

Curiosity can take you in any number of directions, often inspired by the wide reading that you have done in a particular area or perhaps by a deep-seated belief in the importance of a particular topic. How you hit upon a question or an intriguing hypothesis sometimes feels more like guesswork, however, than any philosophical process of deduction or induction. The sorts of influence that lead you to come up with a plausible question often involve having to anticipate likely answers, rather than apply a deductive 'it follows that' kind of logic or arrive at a more general insight through inductive reasoning. Trial and error, conjecture, informed guesswork, may not sound that philosophical, but they do convey the *speculative* element that lies at the heart of what it means to generate new ideas and questions. As curiosity opens up the scope of your inquiry, so one question begs another and, at the very moment that you try to tie a lead down, others proliferate.

Anticipating answers, posing questions

If, as I have suggested, we have to anticipate the kinds of answer that our research might offer, in one sense we have already started to fashion a possible series of questions. By this, I do not mean that through a blinding flash of insight or inspiration we suddenly arrive at a well-formed question. Rather I mean something far less dramatic and, in fact, something far more haphazard. Let me try to elaborate.

Say, for instance, that your chosen area of interest involves the investigation of a series of new economic changes at the workplace or, alternatively, a recent shift in the broad spectrum of political activism and dissent. In relation to the former, something, for example, about the new insecurities of employment at the workplace caught your imagination as a topic or, in respect of the latter, your keen interest in the Internet led you to be curious about the development of online activism and e-protest. Whatever the case, you want to know more about the extent of these interesting new developments. Where are they taking place? How far have they progressed? Why are they happening? And what implications do they hold for the future of work or for the future of political protest?

The questions themselves are quite unremarkable until, that is, you actively wish to *research* them, and then they *open* up in all kinds of ways. A simple question like *where* the new economic insecurities have taken hold, for instance, invites a further set of questions beyond that of straightforward location: such as which groups of workers and industries have borne the brunt of employment change? Our curiosity may lead us to plunge straight into the data on the growing part-time workforce in services, but a hunch may suggest otherwise and turn us towards the full-time workforce in the old manufacturing industries. Either lead may prove fruitful. Thus from a straightforward location question, a host of further issues presents itself for consideration and exerts pressure on us to think about the detail of the investigation, the extent of its empirical coverage, and the kinds of evidence sought. Already there are a lot of things going on and any one of the above issues will have some bearing on the kinds of answer anticipated.

In much the same way, to ask *why* new forms of precarious employment have come about is to raise questions about what we understand by causality and connection. What kinds of association do we assume hold between actors, firms, events or political ideas that could bring about such a risky state of affairs at the workplace? When we assume that one thing follows another, do we have in mind a contingent set of factors or something more rigid? Or are we talking about a much looser and heterogeneous set of ties and associations altogether? And just to add a further twist to this, to ask where something like the shift towards precarious employment has taken place may require that we already know, or have a good idea at least, why it has happened. Questions spin out into other questions and certain questions require a particular response.

But this, I should stress, is all part of the process of *beginning*.

Beginning and beginning-again

Edward Said, a philosopher, literacy critic and political writer all rolled into one, in his book, *Beginnings* (1978), set himself the task of reflecting philosophically about what it means to *begin* a project, be it a novel, philosophical tract, historical exercise or research endeavour. What particularly interested him was what sort of project tends to insist upon the importance of *beginnings* and what sort of work is involved in beginning something or in even contemplating the start of a project. Rather than take the beginning of something for granted, as the first stage of a linear process that moves on relentlessly from one stage to the next, Said looked more closely at many of the taken-for-granted assumptions about what it means to begin something. Only now it is not just any beginning that concerns us, but the activity of beginning a research project and of formulating a research question.

In thinking about beginning as an *activity* with its own peculiar characteristics and ambiguities, rather than merely the first stage of a much longer project, Said was keen to problematize the very idea that beginning something is a philosophically innocent exercise. More than that, he was keen to show that the process of beginning is bound up with all kinds of thoughts, relationships and practices that are rarely acknowledged, let alone reflected upon. For him, the richness and complexity of beginning as an activity implied:

- 1 that whatever it is that you have had thoughts on is already a project under way; that you have *already begun* to reflect upon what it is that you wish to investigate;
- 2 that beginning, in Said's words, 'implies return and repetition rather than, say, simple linear accomplishment' (1978, p.viii); that *beginning* allows for *beginning-again* where the work of reflection and iteration are part of the sustained activity;
- 3 that any starting point *places* the project in relation to all that has gone before; that beginning something establishes a relationship of continuity or antagonism (or both) to an existing body of thought;
- 4 that beginning implies *intention*, in the sense that there is a purposeful engagement with a subject area; that how we begin gives *direction* to what follows.

Let me expand upon each of these points in the context of what it means to begin to formulate a research question.

Of the four points, perhaps the first is almost intuitive in the sense that you have probably read in your field and mulled over the possibilities before reaching the stage, albeit very preliminary, of 'fixing' a research question. The idea that, from the very first moment, a project is already under way, however, draws attention to the *experimental* nature of beginnings, where

we may stumble across all kinds of ideas and developments, some of which may serve only as a distraction. Or rather that is what it may seem like. To sort out which leads add something to our thinking by opening up new questions from those that seem to take us off at a complete tangent is precisely the *work* of beginning.

Consider an earlier example – that of the growth of new forms of political dissent through online activism and e-protest. Because it is a relatively new development, it is a field of study that could open up in all kinds of unforeseen ways. Much of our time is likely to be spent tracking down incidents of online activism and trying to understand them (posing questions of the 'where', 'how', 'why' and 'what' variety). As we begin to feel confident about the scope of the subject, new connections may suggest themselves, some of which elude our grasp and indeed comprehension. What few 'solid' leads that we have to go on no longer feel quite so certain, but then again . . . In this way, doubt and reflection, as positive qualities, characterize a process that has already begun.

This takes us to Said's second point, that the work of reflection and iteration is part of the sustained activity of beginning. To reach the point where you are able to elaborate confidently the research question that you are trying to answer entails a journey that is rarely, if ever, linear. Once the process of experimentation is under way, it involves, as we have seen, following leads wherever they may take us. The more that you find out about something like online activism and e-protest, the more possibilities there seem to be to work with that you had not quite anticipated before. You may, even at this early stage, decide to change your mind; you may revise your initial thoughts and in so doing revise a still somewhat nebulous research question. You may even abandon one question for another because something does not quite fit anymore. In other words, in some fashion or other, you *begin-again*. This, to follow Said's reasoning, is all part of the work of beginning.

Said's third point is of a rather different order from the previous two and draws attention to the fact that no beginning starts from scratch. Whatever the area that we choose to research there are *antecedents* of one type or another, be it a body of previous thought or a set of empirical shifts, which we can neither ignore nor dispense with at will. Of course, there may be echoes of previous ideas and approaches in our thinking that we may not be entirely aware of, but it is precisely part of the beginning work to find out whether or not this is in fact the case. There is, in academic work, an intellectual responsibility at the beginning of any research to find out what has gone before and to engage such materials with an open mind or at least one that is not entirely made up (the issue of intellectual responsibility is a theme that runs throughout this book).

It is this process of engagement which places a new project in relation to all previous work, existing trends and prior thinking. Such an engagement represents both the beginning of a project and its point of *departure*, in so far as the choice of beginning sets out the lines of difference and

similarity from what has gone before. The very question that you tentatively set for yourself at the start of a project shows where you intend to depart from previous insights and how far your thinking overlaps with existing attitudes, concerns and conceptions. There is an element of risk involved at this precise moment as, on the basis of experimentation, you set out your claim to originality.

If we continue with the example of online activism and e-protest, having perhaps revised your initial thoughts about the scope of the inquiry, you still nevertheless want to say something different about political protest from what has gone before. Although the subject matter of online activism is a relatively recent one, you may want to press a claim for cyberactivism, for instance, as a distinctly new form of political mobilization, one that has not been witnessed before and which marks out a new chapter in the history of political struggle. So your provisional research question (which, note incidentally, anticipates the answer to some extent) might seek to place itself in relation to existing accounts of political struggle by asking: 'How far is online activism a new form of political protest?'

Now, this may appear straightforward enough as a point of departure, yet the question is not without risk. Suppose e-protest turns out to be just another way of mobilizing people that is little different from before, aside that is from the use of the Internet? Instead of paper-based petitions we now have electronic petitions; in place of glossy pamphlets and leaflets we have accessible websites, and so forth. What if online campaigning amounts to little more than a new technique of political collaboration? Such concerns and dilemmas form part of the beginning engagement with what has gone before and anything learnt feeds back into a reformulation of your research question.

Finally, and following on from the previous point, there is Said's assertion that the beginning of a project represents an engagement with a particular purpose in mind. Thus to pose something like a research question reveals an intellectual intention to investigate an event or phenomenon in a particular way; it gives *direction* to what follows by suggesting certain avenues of inquiry and not others. While the process of experimentation may open up a field of research in all kinds of ways, many of which may be unforeseen, the intended direction of the study interestingly has the opposite effect: it closes down research possibilities.

This may seem odd at first sight, but in the process of anticipating the kinds of answer that might be given to the question in hand, we are pressed to leave out all sorts of material evidence and (what look like) promising leads. Right at the very beginning we find ourselves stumbling in one direction rather than another because our intention, for instance to investigate cyberactivism with a loose question in mind, narrows the focus of inquiry. As you work your question, as you try to run to ground its possibilities, so you limit the number of things you can reasonably say about political protest and social movements in general.

Much, clearly, is at stake at the beginning of a research project, in terms of the manner of experimentation, the revision of our ideas, the engagement with what has gone before and the commitment to a certain line of inquiry that a particular research question suggests. But, in pointing this out, there is also the broader philosophical issue of what it *means* to begin that underpins these observations. If to begin a research project is a more complex, ambiguous affair than appears at first glance, then that is because much relies upon *how* you begin: the questions that you pose, the leads that you open up, the links that you explore and the literatures that you choose to interrogate, all make a difference. Put another way, the beginning has ramifications far beyond that of being merely the initial stage of your research.

How you begin also forces you to consider a bigger philosophical issue: namely, whether or not your ideas correspond to or adequately 'fit' the world 'out there'. In so far as much of what you do at the beginning – posing questions, writing down your ideas, reading literatures, talking through research possibilities, and picturing alternatives – takes place within language, is there some way of getting between the 'word' and the 'world' to tell what is 'our' construction and what is 'really out there'? Are any of our claims detached from our language and our beliefs? Can we know the way the world is apart from language, by somehow stepping outside it?

These questions move us on to a broad philosophical plane that takes us initially into the realm of language, discourse and epistemology.

Questions are produced, not found

For some philosophers, language and its conventions are the main if not the sole way in which we can express our **knowledge-claims**. On this view, in order to arrive at a new angle on something or to give a different twist to a received understanding, language, narrative and discourse are the only possible means through which such claims may be aired. New leads, new ideas, new questions, and the particular knowledges bound up within them, do not mirror a world 'out there'. There is no separate realm of 'facts' which, if we work at it, our accounts somehow move closer to or provide a better representation. True enough, the world is 'out there', but for many that is beside the point as our beliefs about the world are not.

Finding one's feet in a new research area is tricky if we accept this view, however. There is, after all, something comforting about the notion that if we mess around in the real world long enough, some leads will turn up. In fact they may well do so, but rather than such leads and questions suggesting themselves to the researcher from the mass of evidence 'out there', the two philosophical figures that we are about to consider would want you to see things differently. On their understanding, leads and questions do not 'jump out' at us from the real world, they are *produced*.

The first position (outlined in the next subsection) is one adopted by Richard Rorty, a philosopher working in the North American pragmatist tradition of John Dewey and William James. In contrast to the views of these earlier nineteenth- and twentieth-century pragmatists, however, Rorty insists that we cannot connect with a world of experience outside language. Language, as a set of tools for dealing with the world rather than a medium of representation, is for him all that we have to work with. As such, we judge our descriptions of things, the vocabularies that we use, by how well they best suit our current purposes. In research terms, on this view, there is nothing 'out there' to discover, no frontiers of knowledge to break through, only language as a tool for redescription that allows us to do things we could not do before and to think in other, more useful ways. If we accept this line of reasoning, the fruits of our research efforts become 'true', according to Rorty, because they are useful; they are not useful because they are true.

The second position (outlined in the subsection that follows) stems from the earlier work of Michel Foucault, a philosopher writing in France in the latter half of last century, whose critical histories of the practices of modern medicine, the penal system and attitudes towards sexuality, centred on their discursive construction. Discourses, for Foucault, comprise groups of related statements which govern the variety of ways in which it is possible to talk about something and which thus make it difficult, if not impossible, to think and act outside them. What can be said about a particular subject matter, how it is said and by whom stem from a specific discursive practice. Thus in research terms, knowledge-claims are seen as moves in a kind of power-game, where only certain kinds of question are possible to ask. So, if we go down this philosophical route, knowledge and power reinforce one another and set out the grounds by which truth is claimed.

One of the interesting things that we will see about Rorty and Foucault is that despite their differences they seem to share an assumption that our existing vocabularies, our current ways of thinking about things, have become somewhat entrenched. If anything, they act as a barrier to fresh thinking, almost a nuisance that needs to be overcome if we are to imagine things differently and to pose new questions. It is this, the sense in which we can imagine things differently, to provide answers to questions not yet adequately posed, that I want to keep in focus. Neither account speaks directly to how you produce a research question, but both provide a philosophical understanding of the process involved which rules out the possibility that it is the world 'out there' which decides which question 'fits' better or is the most appropriate.

Rorty's pragmatist moves

One of the claims that Richard Rorty is fond of repeating, almost like a mantra, is that language 'goes all the way down' (1982, p.xxx; 1991a,

p.100). Because the social world 'out there' does not present itself to us in any simple fashion, or 'throw up' clues for us to find, we can only apprehend it through language. And because we cannot step outside language, we have little choice other than to produce our descriptions of the world in line with what use they might serve. This is the first pragmatist move. Knowing things and using them are indistinguishable practices. On this understanding, language is not some aimless exchange, it is performed with some given purpose in mind. For Rorty, all our knowledge is known to us under some description or other which best suits our current purposes. Knowledge as such is useful to us, it gives us the power to do things that we want to do. Or in Rorty's words:

Pragmatists hope to make it impossible for the sceptic to raise the question, 'Is our knowledge of things adequate to the way things really are?' They substitute for this traditional question the *practical* question, 'Are our ways of describing things, of relating them to other things so as to make them fulfil our needs more adequately, as good as possible? Or can we do better?' (Rorty, 1999, p.72)

So, if your research is driven by a particular purpose and your aim is to add something to the existing stock of knowledge, then, realistically, you should put to one side any worries that you may have about facing a world of 'hard' facts and work away at producing an innovative research question from the linguistic tools available. In other words, you should set about the task of refining a question that best suits your given research interests and needs.

Now, as far as I can make out, Rorty does not believe that this process of linguistic construction is something that is best left to idle contemplation. There is work involved, the sustained activity of the kind described by Said in the previous section. In Rorty's hands, however, this work has a distinctly pragmatic edge where the notion of what 'best suits' holds the key to any inquiry. For the issue is not about constructing a question which directs us towards a better, more accurate picture of what is 'out there', but rather one that works better for certain purposes than any previous tool. A research question in this line of thought becomes a tool for doing something that could not have been done under a previous set of descriptions. The question opens up possibilities, but only for as long as it allows people to do things that they could not do before – to see things in a different light, to put things together that were previously held apart, to examine something differently, and so forth.

If you think back to the example of the new insecurities of employment at the workplace as a potential research topic, on this account, we should simply drop the idea that our thoughts about the topic somehow mirror what is actually going on in the world of work and busy ourselves trying to come up with a question that enables us to go about researching the topic in a more productive manner. The permanent edginess around

pragmatist

language

vocabularies

redescription

discourses
statements

jobs, work and pensions that currently seems to surround matters of lifestyle and employment, where risk is routine, may be a more productive entry point compared to what has gone before, for instance. We can only give it a try, to see where it might lead in terms of anticipating answers to potential questions. What we cannot do, according to Rorty, is hold this belief up to the world as if it were a mirror that we can polish to progressively achieve a more adequate reflection.

Rorty first spelt out a number of these ideas in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, which was published in 1980, and followed this up with a collection of essays in 1982 entitled *Consequences of Pragmatism*. It was the publication of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* in 1989 which proved to be the most controversial and widely read of his writings, however, not only because novelists and poets received preferential billing over philosophers, but also because it lauded 'ironists'; that is, those individuals who are 'never quite able to take themselves seriously because [they are] always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves' (1989, pp.73–4). This was intended less as an expression of humility, however, and more as a statement concerning the contingent status of all that we know, and thus an injunction to try things differently. In the first essay of the 1989 volume, 'The contingency of language', he set out a way in which he thought we could do just that and move beyond entrenched vocabularies to embrace the possibility of new thinking. In broad terms, he argued:

- 1 that there is no 'method' to any of this, all that anyone can really do is 're-describe lots and lots of things in new ways', to develop *new vocabularies* that tempt others to adopt descriptions that make previous ones appear limited;
- 2 that inquiry is akin to a process of *recontextualization*, where metaphorical re-description provides a jolt to the imagination by shaking up previous thinking, for example where familiar words are used in unfamiliar ways to pose a novel question.

On the former, Rorty is suggesting that all that we can do is produce more *telling re-descriptions* in the hope of inciting others to work with and even extend them. An ironist, he argues 'hopes that by the time she has finished using old words in new senses, not to mention introducing brand-new words, people will no longer ask questions phrased in the old words' (1989, p.78). Redescribing things again and again thus becomes part of what it means to experiment, to seek a more productive entry point compared to what has gone before. For Rorty, there is no in-built faculty that allows us to recognize the 'truth' in some description when we first stumble across it. Rather, all that is available to us is a sense of what best suits a given purpose. A description that 'best suits', not one that 'best fits', a world beyond us is probably the sum of it. While this position does not mean that we have a licence to say whatever we like about anything, it

does seem to suggest, to me at least, that all questions are possible so long as they are practicable and potentially convincing. Our re-descriptions should work better for certain purposes and provoke others into using them. As Rorty puts it:

This sort of philosophy does not work piece by piece, analysing concept after concept, or testing thesis after thesis. Rather, it works holistically and pragmatically. It says things like 'try thinking of it this way' – or more specifically, 'try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions'. It does not pretend to have a better candidate for doing the same old things which we did when we spoke in the old way. Rather, it suggests that we might want to stop doing those things and do something else. (Rorty, 1989, p.9)

Even if we were to go along with this, however, how do you then arrive at a provocative vocabulary of some event, experience or recent development which itself is suggestive of new questions, new lines of inquiry? For Rorty, the answer seems principally to lie with the process of *metaphorical re-description*.

What does Rorty mean by this? The nub of it for him, it seems, is that metaphorical re-description allows us, as he puts it, to 'use familiar words in unfamiliar ways' (1989, p.18), not for the sake of novelty, but to enable us to see something differently for the first time, to cast something familiar in a new light. Tossing a metaphor into something that we write, he says, 'is like using italics, or illustrations, or odd punctuation or formats' (1989, p.18); it represents 'a voice from outside' (1991b, p.13) that alerts us to something different, something new. In short, thinking metaphorically for Rorty is a kind of tool for jolting our imaginations, where a new, metaphorical use of old words (e.g. 'flexible firms'), neologisms (e.g. 'genes') or novel associations (e.g. cyberactivism) may prompt us to think about things in a different way. Of course, there is no guarantee that the kind of recontextualization that he has in mind will provoke the type of reaction he envisages, but what he is trying to suggest is that metaphor is the means by which we *produce* new descriptions, new vocabularies, that enable us to go about things differently.

Rorty draws upon the work of two philosophers to present his case, Donald Davidson (a philosopher of language) and Mary Hesse (a philosopher of science). Through them, he is at pains to stress that metaphor does not lead to the production of new meaning as such. Rather it provides a new language for exploration that perhaps stops us from going down familiar avenues of inquiry. The construction of a new description of something, the ability to pose the question differently, does not in this respect enable us to carry on as before with our studies, albeit with some modifications to our vocabulary (for example, a 'new' politics of resistance or a 'new' cultural geography, yet cast in a distinctly familiar mould).

metaphorical
re-description

metaphor

Rather, a new vocabulary shifts the ground irrevocably and enables us to do something else entirely.

For my part, I am not sure that we have to make quite this leap, as it is not entirely evident from the examples that Rorty offers that it is 'something else entirely' that is at issue. The juxtaposing of previously unrelated texts or ideas, the deployment of terms from one context to another in which they were previously absent or the use of an 'old' term in a new metaphorical guise, all seem to me to be the kinds of skill that Rorty has in mind. If it were otherwise then every new piece of redescription would have to be 'ground-breaking' or equivalent to a paradigm shift, and most, it seems, are not.

At a practical level, much of our language is dead metaphor anyway (the 'mouth' of a river, the 'leg' of a chair), and its extension when we are trying to think about things in new ways may have little in terms of shock value. Rorty seems to understand this when he argues that:

To think of metaphorical sentences as the forerunners of new uses of language, uses which may eclipse and erase old uses, is to think of metaphor as on a par with perception and inference, rather than thinking of it as having a merely 'heuristic' or 'ornamental' function. (Rorty, 1991b, p.14)

In drawing attention to the heuristic or ornamental function of metaphor, Rorty wants to reserve the role of metaphor for the imaginative jolt, not the exercise that passes for a simple model of what is out there or some decorative function. The latter 'ornamental' use of metaphor, in particular, has a long history of use in literature and poetry where a feeling may be evoked to great effect through an imaginative use of words, but in general the ornamental use of metaphor has often tended to be just that: mere decoration. The uses of geographic metaphor, for example in cultural studies, where meanings are 'mapped' and subjectivities are 'cartographically' represented, neither of which owes anything to the techniques of mapping, are ornamental in form. That is, they do not offer new ways of thinking about their subject matter. Where metaphorical redescription acts as a precursor to a new vocabulary, however, it is more likely to generate questions that surprise, that for Rorty change the conversation.

Perhaps an example of such a conversation stopper is the vocabulary of risk which sprang on to the social science academic scene in the late 1980s/early 1990s. For some, risk rapidly became the central dynamic around which a range of institutional settings from science, class and politics to the workplace, the family and the environment, are organized. At the time, many wondered aloud about just how novel or indeed plausible such a claim was, but nonetheless found themselves busy engaging it. Others found the mix of uncertainties and anxieties expressed through a vocabulary of risk a useful tool to explore familiar topics; these, in turn, allowed them to do things they could not do before as they sought

out new leads and explored patterns of behaviour previously overlooked. The point is that, although not all were convinced by the new vocabulary, once a number were tempted by what could be done with it, they expressed little interest in what had been said before about these institutional matters.

So, from Rorty's point of view, it is precisely the appearance of partially formed yet promising vocabularies that *produces* new leads and new questions. For him, 'fresh thinking' is something that is adopted by others once they have become convinced of its usefulness for one purpose or another. In privileging language and distrusting experience, however, the adoption of a particular vocabulary seems to rely upon rhetorical persuasion above all else. There is no room in Rorty's 'liberal' world for the possibility that some vocabularies may be repressed or sidelined, or indeed that language itself may be wrapped up with power and politics in ways that limit the questions that we pose.

Foucault's discursive practices

If language, for Rorty 'goes all the way down', where all our knowledge amounts to descriptions to suit our current purposes, probably the equivalent uncompromising claim for Foucault is that all knowledge presupposes power. The production of knowledge through language and convention is mixed up with power in ways that implicate the latter in all that we take to be 'true', as well as the circumstances under which something becomes 'true'. To be fair, language is not really the issue for Foucault; rather it is the *discursive practices* – the statements which provide a language for talking about something – which hold his attention and which, he claims, serve to restrict the number of things it is possible to say about different topics and areas of study. Discursive practices are, in his words, characterized by 'a delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts and theories' (Foucault, 1977, p.199).

If this sounds a little high-handed, then that is far from Foucault's intention. For him, there is an everyday sense to the way in which the 'obviousness' of a discourse works its way through our thinking and sets the norms for discussion and debate. The emphasis placed by Foucault upon power's relationship to knowledge is a productive one, where we are able to engage in all kinds of practice, but only in so far as we can make sense of them. However, it is how we are able to articulate and make sense of something that is far from open-ended and which, according to Foucault, is systematically governed in both its formulation and understanding. There are limits to the questions that we may ask of things if we want to appear meaningful and intelligible.

As researchers, we are likely to find ourselves caught up in the thinking that circulates around a particular topic and which predisposes us

discursive practices

to 'know' it in a certain way. When it becomes difficult to think about a topic in any other way, then, according to Foucault, we are not only subject to a particular 'regime of truth', in so far as we are unable to think outside it, we also sustain and extend that arrangement. In short, we are positioned by discursive practices and, in turn, serve to ground them.

On this understanding, our research interests and topics are framed by what has already been said about them and, as a consequence, limit what we can say about them. So if we wish to engage through our research in a debate about new forms of political activism and dissent, for instance, we have little choice but to position ourselves within its existing knowledge-claims. To do otherwise would be to risk misunderstanding and, quite simply, to appear unintelligible. For Foucault, the point is not that we are stuck within fixed, 'trammel' lines of knowing, but rather that for all the possible questions that we may ask about a particular topic, they remain systematically governed in both style and understanding. On this basis, it would seem that *only certain answers are allowed for* – those which fall within the rules and conventions of a particular discursive formation. Or in his words:

By system of formation, then, I mean a complex group of relations that function as a rule: it lays down what must be related, in a particular discursive practice, for such and such an enunciation to be made, for such and such a concept to be used, for such and such a strategy to be organized. To define a system of formation in its specific individuality is therefore to characterize a discourse or a group of statements by the regularity of a practice. (Foucault, 1972/1969, p.74)

Thus any potential research topic, such as the exploration of new forms of political struggle, is likely to come with its own conceptual baggage which, in various ways, governs what is 'sayable' about, for example, dissent, protest and political mobilization. If we follow Rorty, we are still able to give all possible leads a try, but now we should also reflect upon the predispositions which make it possible even to contemplate new forms of political struggle at this particular moment. In this way, we might get a handle on what Foucault meant by the assertion that 'discourses produce the objects of knowledge' and that none of our questions makes sense outside discourse.

Together with 'The order of discourse' (1981/1970), Foucault's inaugural lecture given in 1970 at the Collège de France, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972/1969), published in 1969, represents his most explicit attempt to outline the rules and categories which underpin the formation of discourses and thus of knowledge itself. The latter text, in many respects, is a kind of methodological postscript to an earlier work published in 1966, *The Order of Things* (1970/1966), written, it would seem, with the explicit intention of distancing himself from a chronological interpretation of the 'history of ideas'. In trying to expose the almost

'unvoiced' rules by which our objects of study are given to us, Foucault sets out to describe the discontinuous and delimiting nature of discourse. At a general level, he considers discursive formations to be:

- 1 a group of statements (the archive) which may differ in substance or even contradict one another, yet possess a certain *regularity* in the *relations* between statements that provides an unproblematic way of talking about a topic;
- 2 discontinuous practices, which may cross over one another, exclude one another, even work along new lines, yet remain *governed* by what it is possible to say and think about a particular topic.

This is a rather terse formulation, but in many ways all that it really means is that certain ground rules *enable* us to make all kinds of descriptions and opposing characterizations about, say, the politics of struggle or the politics of development as one example of struggle, yet those self-same rules *limit* what it is possible to say about economic development without appearing odd or beyond comprehension. As with Rorty, there are no 'truths' about development 'out there' waiting to be discovered, but in contrast our ideas do not become true because they are useful; rather, for Foucault, the 'truth' about something is historically

... constituted by all that was said in all the statements that named it, divided it up, described it, explained it, traced its developments, indicated its various correlations, judged it, and possibly gave it speech by articulating, in its name, discourses that were to be taken as its own. (Foucault, 1972/1969, p.32)

It is not, I should stress, that we cannot stand outside a universalizing discourse of development, with its consistent statements about growth, self-reliance and sustainability for instance, or take a step back from any discourse masquerading as knowledge for that matter. In your research endeavours, the ability to cast off, say, the predispositions of your discipline which currently frame your field of study is an important milestone *en route* to asking new questions, but that does not necessarily make it any easier to think outside such constitutive discourses, or to dismiss their practical consequences.

So how should one position oneself in relation to such distracting and preoccupying discourses? Perhaps by following Said's lead in recognizing that our starting point places us in relation to all that has gone before and that the process of engagement involves dealing with the discourses which have shaped our field of inquiry – as scattered and as dispersed through any number of observations, statements and findings as they may be. By tracing the positions that various researchers and commentators have taken up within a particular field of study and the sets of questions which define

it, it may be possible to take on the role of archaeologist and to analyse the 'archive' for the discursive regularities which compose it.

As I see it, though, the lessons of archaeology are not the only ones that we can draw from Foucault's description of discourses. At a more modest level, in terms of the possible range of questions that we can ask about our subject matter and remain plausible, Foucault's work highlights the restricted nature of what can be said, on what terms and, invariably, by whom. The role of chance in all this is likewise diminished, as the possibility is always there that what remains 'unthought' is, strictly speaking, unavailable to us as a resource from which potential research questions may be drawn. If knowledge-claims are moves in a kind of language power-game, as Foucault seems to suggest, then the production of unlimited new leads and new questions is effectively ruled out. There are only so many 'subject-positions' that we, as researchers, can occupy.

If we turn this on its head, however, on a more positive note, what Foucault's archaeological analysis has to offer is precisely a way to arrive at 'fresh thinking' by recognizing the discursive constraints that we operate under and how we may conduct ourselves differently in relation to our chosen topic. The temptation to adopt a new vocabulary, on this understanding, overlooks the fact that we have first to grasp where we are speaking from and how it is that we think we have something to say.

The question, then . . .

The purpose of the chapter, as stated at the outset, has been to introduce you to a particular way of thinking about what it means to produce a research question. As the first of three chapters with this aim in mind, the decision to start with Richard Rorty and Michel Foucault, as you may have guessed, was far from accidental in so far as they represent a distinctive philosophical approach to the relationship between, on the one hand, our words and our language, and, on the other hand, the world 'out there' as it really is. For when it comes to the formulation of new knowledges, ideas and questions, both side with the 'word' rather than with the 'world', because for them there is no way of getting between language and its object. In short, there is no way of telling what is 'our' construction and what is really 'out there', and thus little point in claiming that some ideas 'fit' reality better than others.

This is not an issue that, for you as a researcher, is going to go away, nor indeed is it one that you can resolve after a moment's thought. Essentially, the issue is an **epistemological** one, by which I mean that it revolves around how 'we know what we know' – the conditions and practices that make knowledge possible. If you come down on the side that our knowledge of the world is possible only through the mediation of language, that there is no independent way to know the world other than

through the words, marks and noises that construct it for us, then you occupy a position not dissimilar to Rorty and Foucault.

Such a position, however, is not without its consequences. For one thing, you cannot side with the 'word' rather than the 'world' and then proceed to talk *as if* your ideas and questions somehow refer to or represent more accurately what is really going on in, say, the economy or in the community at large. For Rorty at least, our ideas do not refer to or represent anything; as a form of linguistic description they are the only tools that we have at our disposal to make a difference – in particular, to ask the kinds of question that we could not ask before. Indeed, some old questions may become unaskable simply because new questions bring about an entirely different way of thinking about something.

There is more than just a hint of consistency involved in what I have just said. The implication is that philosophical positions, although far from hermetically sealed, provide a set of resources which, if you choose to adopt one rather than another, entail consequences throughout the process of doing research. At the beginning (a moment replete with its own ambiguities, as we have had cause to note), when you find yourself trying to provide answers to questions not yet adequately posed, your engagement with philosophical ideas is likely to influence what it is that you hope to say through your research. Someone like Rorty or Foucault will not provide you with a guidebook as to what questions you should ask, but they do alert us to what is at stake in the production of new ideas and questions – in terms of what questions it is *possible* to ask and what it is *possible* to know.

But, as the next chapter will argue, that is almost certainly too simple.

Further reading

For those interested in an exposition and sympathetic critique of the ideas of Rorty and Foucault, Richard Bernstein's *The New Constellation* (Polity Press, 1991) remains one of the most insightful treatments of their thinking, especially in relation to politics and ethics. Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Penguin, 1999) outlines his more recent thinking on these issues. For an engaging and wide-ranging account of the relationship between the 'real' and the 'constructed' nature of the world, see Ian Hacking's *The Social Construction of What?* (Harvard University Press, 1999).

2

The play of the world

Nigel Clark

What are these fiery imperatives, these questions which are the beginning of the world? (Gilles Deleuze, 1994, p.200)

Introduction

Coming face to face with something strange and new, looking afresh at the familiar, making a connection between things or ideas that were previously apart – these are some of the pleasures of doing research. What makes research enticing, however, can also come across as daunting and intimidating. That is because finding ourselves in the presence of the ‘new’ or feeling ourselves to be engaged in something ‘original’ are not simply felicitous moments that we might one day hope to experience as we go about our research. They are also, in a sense, *demands*. Some degree of ‘originality’ in research is called for by funding bodies, doctoral programmes, journal editors and just about everyone else who minds the gates of the social science establishment. And that requirement can seem very demanding indeed when you are taking your first steps into the field of independent or self-generated research.

In this chapter, we dwell further on the process of generating a research question, with particular attention to the demand for originality. What is originality, I will be asking, and where is it to be found? Are there ways to make the requirement for ‘originality’ or ‘newness’ seem less threatening and more promising? As you will have gleaned from the last chapter, good research questions require effort on your part. They have to be crafted out of the materials or resources at hand, rather than conjured out of the ether. But just what are the materials out of which this work of generating questions takes place? As we have seen, both Rorty and Foucault point to certain constraints on the resources which are available at any time or place to think with or think through. What they suggest, in their respective ways, is that the particular arrangement of words and things that we inherit from our social milieu tends to channel our thinking. In this way, what we end up thinking and doing may be only a fraction of the possibilities that could conceivably be open to us.

Rorty, more obviously than the early Foucault, suggests a way out of these strictures. As we saw, he proposes a playful, experimental use of language as a way to generate fresh perspectives on a familiar world. Rather than assuming that the world ‘out there’ should dictate our descriptions, Rorty affirms that there is play or contingency in language. Language is not obligated to the world. It is a medium in which we have a certain liberty to create and invent, and this includes using language metaphorically to craft original research questions – questions which offer a new angle or fresh purchase on the objects of our inquiry.

This idea that there is ‘contingency’ in language – or in culture more generally – is one of the predominant intellectual themes of recent decades. Especially in the social sciences and humanities, fewer and fewer theorists adhere to the notion that human thought is determined or constrained by an objective world – a world outside or independent of thinking beings. We need to be mindful, however, that there are different ways in which the contingency of language or culture can be understood, and that each of these ways has its own effects and implications. In this chapter, I want to address the work of two French philosophers, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, who, like Rorty and Foucault, challenge the assumption that the prime task of thought is to mirror an external world. Derrida and Deleuze both seem to affirm the free play of language in a manner resonant with Rorty. But on closer inspection, I will be arguing, their respective writings suggest something quite different from the prioritizing of human language that is at the core of Rorty’s philosophical stance.

Deleuze and Derrida are part of the same generation and general intellectual milieu as Foucault. Though there are significant differences in the philosophical backgrounds, intentions and writing styles of Deleuze and Derrida, there are also some crucial points at which their writings converge. Deleuze makes a strong claim that thought should be inventive rather than merely descriptive. But this is far from a privileging of language, because for him the play of words is intimately tied up with the broader play of the world. Language has the capacity to be creative and inventive, Deleuze seems to be saying, only because it is open to a wider world which is equally generative and experimental.

Derrida, on the other hand, initially seems closer to Rorty, in that a great deal of his work engages primarily with language and draws out the unpredictable and contingent nature of writing. However, while Derrida may deny that ‘word’ and ‘world’ can ever attain a pure and seamless fusion, this is not the same thing as saying that they are utterly and inevitably separated. While it may be expressed in more subtle and ‘textual’ fashion than in the writings of Deleuze, there are nevertheless numerous indications in Derrida’s work that the idea of the closure of language to the world around it is something he deeply resists.

Both Derrida and Deleuze, then, set about opening the play of words to the play of the world. But what might this mean for the question of originality in research? What are the implications of a philosophical

position which refuses to separate language from the rest of reality for the 'work' of crafting a research question? We have seen that neither Rorty nor Foucault provides us with a blueprint for posing questions, or indeed, for thinking and acting in general. This is no less the case for Deleuze and Derrida, whose philosophical writings, if anything, are even more of a challenge for those in search of guidelines for thought and research. For all the talk of 'play', it must be said, there is nothing leisurely about reading Derrida or Deleuze. Their books are hard going: complex, convoluted and frequently mystifying – even for the well-initiated. But there are ways of reading their respective works, if we accept the help of some of their many commentators, that can have real and direct consequences for our 'questioning' of the world around us.

From language to life

We have already encountered Rorty's particular take on the idea of thought as a kind of invention. Well before Rorty, Deleuze had taken up this theme. Deleuze, in turn, was deeply indebted to the French philosopher, Henri Bergson. The following lines, penned by Bergson in the 1940s, are cited by Deleuze in an early work, and thereafter play a pivotal role in his writings:

Discovery, or uncovering, has to do with what already exists . . . ; it was therefore certain to happen sooner or later. Invention gives being to what did not exist; it might never have happened. (Bergson, cited in Deleuze, 1988/1966, p.15)

This distinction between revealing a world 'out there' and actively participating in the coming into existence of new things or new worlds is at the heart of *Difference and Repetition* (1994/1968). Deleuze's first major outlining of his own philosophical position. In this book, he argues that if our intention is to depict the world, then no matter how rich and diverse this world appears to us, and no matter how accurately we represent it, our thought remains in the thrall of what already exists, or what has already taken place. Drawing from a wide range of sources, including contemporary science, avant-garde art and earlier philosophers such as Spinoza, Nietzsche and Bergson, Deleuze explores another option, which is for thought to concern itself with the conditions under which new things come into existence.

In this sense, rather than looking for the something previously undiscovered, thinkers or researchers should aim 'to bring into being that which does not yet exist' (Deleuze, 1994/1968, p.147). For Deleuze, as for those philosophers who prioritize language, '[t]o think is to create' (1994/1968, p.147). Deleuze, too, encourages a rich and stylish use of language, but he is quite clear that the ultimate aim of this is to unleash the potentials of

life

'life' in general and not simply of language or culture. In a later interview, in which he reflects on *Difference and Repetition* and subsequent work, Deleuze puts it like this:

One's always writing to bring something to life, to free life from where it's trapped. . . . The language for doing that can't be a homogeneous system, it's something unstable, always heterogeneous, in which style carves differences of potential between which things can pass, come to pass, a spark can flash and break out of language itself, to make us see and think what was lying in the shadow around the words, things we were hardly aware existed. (Deleuze, 1995, p.141)

The idea that thought or experience can break out of the enclosure of language and make contact with other elements or forces in the world is a theme which runs through much of Deleuze's work. It is one he returns to and develops further in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987/1980), a book co-written with psychoanalyst Felix Guattari, and perhaps Deleuze's best-known work. Here, in typically poetic fashion, Deleuze and Guattari give examples of the sort of meetings of apparently unconnected classes of objects that happen constantly in the real world: 'a semiotic fragment rubs shoulders with a chemical interaction, an electron crashes into a language, a black hole captures a genetic message' (1987/1980, p.69). And they are quite explicit: this is the play of the world, *not* the play of metaphor: 'we are not saying "like an electron", "like an interaction"' (1987/1980, p.69). Indeed, as Deleuze and Guattari intimate, the whole structure of *A Thousand Plateaus*, with all its complex array of ideas and examples, can be seen as putting into practice the idea of disparate elements coming together in a multitude of different ways (see 1987/1980, p.6).

Now, it may not be immediately apparent what the practical implications are that we might draw from such eventualities as an 'electron crashing into language' (though it may have something to do with the word-processing malfunctions I experience from time to time!). Before going on to tease out the consequences of such ideas for the question of originality – or the origination of questions – I want to introduce Derrida's rather more subdued and meticulous version of the opening of language to the world.

Derrida's impact on contemporary philosophy first stemmed from a series of books roughly contemporaneous with Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, including *Of Grammatology* (1976/1967) and *Writing and Difference* (1978/1968). These works introduce Derrida's 'deconstructive' approach to philosophy. Deconstruction, at this stage of Derrida's work, entails close readings of well-known texts by philosophers, social scientists and literary figures, which attempt to demonstrate how such writings have even more potential than their own authors recognized. In particular, Derrida seeks out the 'small but tell-tale moment' when a text seems to over-reach its own premises or intentions (Spivak, 1976, p.xxxv). In this

deconstruction

way, he tries to show that writing – or language – does not simply describe the world, but is itself productive and generative – with effects that can neither be anticipated nor controlled (Derrida, 1978/1968, p.11). As Derrida explained in a 1968 interview, this has implications for our understanding of the operations of language *vis-à-vis* the world: ‘for the notion of translation’, he suggests, ‘we would have to substitute a notion of *transformation*’ (1981a/1972, p.20, emphasis in original).

Thus far, it might seem as though we are back with Rorty’s claim of the inescapability of language. And indeed, many of Derrida’s readers have interpreted his work precisely as a sophisticated argument for the impossibility of breaking out of the ‘textuality’ of language and culture to an outside world. But there are other ways to read Derrida’s work. Just as Derrida argues that each written text opens out into the wider world of its intellectual or cultural ‘context’, so too does he seem to be saying that writing and culture in general also open into a broader context, which is to say that there is always a hinge, a point of contact or connection between language and the wider world. Such a perspective on ‘word and world’ is suggested at numerous points in Derrida’s work, including the opening pages of *Of Grammatology* where he proposes that the relationships between the elements of language or writing with which he is concerned might also apply to the arts, to cybernetics, and even to biology, including the ‘most elementary processes of information within the living cell’ (1976/1967, p.9).

Provocations and openings

So while Derrida may be much more cautious than Deleuze in drawing connections between disparate categories of objects, and much less willing to stray from the philosophical and literary fields he knows best, what the two writers share is an interest in the creative potential of any opening to an outside – any play that occurs *between* different entities or systems. In Derrida’s later work, such as *Politics of Friendship* (1997), in which his focus partially shifts from written texts to political and social issues, the theme of encounters with difference or strangeness receive sustained attention. These works, as John Caputo notes, concern themselves with how we might ‘make way’ for whatever is ‘forth-coming’ or ‘in-coming’ from beyond our circle of experience and familiarity (Caputo, 1997, pp.70, 103). This in-coming or coming-forth is what Derrida refers to as an ‘event’. ‘Event’ and ‘invent’ have similar derivations: invention comes from the Latin *inventire* – to come upon – and event from *evenire* – to come forth or happen. One way of looking at deconstruction, then, is to see it as an exploration of the ‘singularity’ of the event, as an inquiry into how we might come to terms with the event’s uniqueness and unpredictability. As Caputo sums up: ‘For Derrida, deconstruction is set in motion by something that calls upon and addresses us, overtakes (sur-prises) and even

event

overwhelms us, to which we must respond, and so be responsive and responsible’ (1997, p.51).

But what are the implications of this concern with the ‘event’ of an opening, a connection or a meeting for the posing of new questions or the beginning of projects? Derrida himself has drawn attention to the part this ‘openness’ plays in the generating of a project. When asked by an interviewer where he got the idea for a book or article, he replied:

A sort of animal movement seeks to appropriate what always comes, always, from an *external* provocation. By responding to some request, invitation, or commission, an invention must nevertheless seek itself out, an invention that defies both a given program, a system of expectations, and finally surprises me myself – surprises me by suddenly becoming for me imperious, imperative, inflexible even, like a very tough law. (Derrida, 1995, p.352, emphasis in original)

From the broader context of Derrida’s work, it can be inferred that a ‘request’ may be more than just a formal invitation to write a piece: it can be any sort of solicitation, any kind of prompting, jolting or imploring that comes from the world around. What happens first, Derrida seems to suggest, is an intuitive or visceral opening up to whatever it is he finds provocative. Only later, as the project takes off, does it seem to impose its own demands for rigour and focus.

For Deleuze, no less than for Derrida, it is an ‘external provocation’ which triggers a new idea or a new project. Again this involves something outside ourselves taking hold of us: ‘a fiery imperative’, an incitement which is as unpredictable as it is irresistible. As Deleuze puts it in *Difference and Repetition*:

... there is only involuntary thought. . . . Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental *encounter*. . . . It may be grasped in a range of affective tones; wonder, love, hatred, suffering. (Deleuze, 1994/1968, p.139)

Not surprisingly, the term Deleuze gives to this thought-provoking encounter is an ‘event’. And the event is at least as central to his writings as it is to Derrida. As Deleuze recounted during an interview late in his life, ‘I’ve tried in all my books to discover the nature of events’ (1995, p.141). As with Derrida, Deleuze’s foregrounding of the event reflects his own belief that the subject of thought or action is inevitably ‘in the world’. The thinker, for Deleuze, is thus entangled in the goings-on or happenings that concern him or her. It is not a case of the thinker trying to get a handle on the world from the outside, as it were. When Deleuze and Guattari write that the aim of philosophy ‘is to become worthy of the event’ (1994, p.160), what they mean is that thought should attempt to make sense out of things that occur in order to release or realize their potential. For mere

goings-on to become proper 'events', however, thinkers or researchers have not only to try to comprehend what is happening, but at the same time to open themselves to the transformative effects of these happenings. As in the case of Derrida's deconstructions, it is this affirmation of openness, this notion that the thinker must be moved by whatever is forth-coming or going-on that seems to set Deleuze at odds with more conventional models of thought and research.

Hostage to events

But how can being 'moved' by happenings, goings-on or encounters generate a research project? I want to turn now to an example: one of those rare cases where the researcher tells us exactly where they were, what they were doing, and how they felt as the idea for a project came upon them. This will help give us a sense of how, in practice, originality or inventiveness is linked to a certain openness or willingness to be 'called upon' or 'overwhelmed'.

My example comes from the book *Virtual Geography* (1994) by the Australian cultural theorist McKenzie Wark. His story features an incident from the television coverage of the Iraq hostage crisis that was screened on 23 August 1990, some months prior to the first Gulf War. This is the moment when Iraqi president Saddam Hussein pats the head of seven-year-old Stuart Lockwood as he makes a remark about hostages playing a role as 'heroes of peace'. As Wark recounts:

I'm lying in bed with my lover and the cat, watching TV, when this hostage things spews out of the TV at me. By a strange accident of geography, the NBC morning news program is shown in Sydney, Australia, around midnight. So here we are, a cozy domestic scene, lapping up the sweet with the bland, suddenly invaded by hostages and threats and urgency and Bryant Gumble. Neither of us is really watching the set at the time. It just happens to be on, a boring interzone of banal happenings, vectoring into our private space. I think it is the word 'hostage' that trips me into actually paying attention. I watch with an unwilling fascination, trying not to let myself submit to this distasteful but canny image. That's when I see something curious; the medium closes up where Saddam Hussein touches that boy. A dictator caresses his hostage in our bedroom. The report gives the impression that the hostage show-and-tell talk show was a long one, but it's those few seconds of the dictator and the boy that made it into the vision mix. The tape is many generations old, blurred and pixelated, but so too is the Orientalist story it revives from the dead. Curiouser and curiouiser. At the next commercial break, I pull on an old track suit and head out the bedroom door. 'Where are you going?' my lover asks. 'To work,' I say. 'To work.' (Wark, 1994, p.6)

The 'Orientalist story' is a reference to the work of Edward Said, whom you encountered in the last chapter. It's the term Said uses to describe a certain way of imagining the east – associated with the colonial era, in which Europeans stereotyped Middle Eastern people, among other things, as sexually repressed but also sensual and perverse. Wark is reminded of this story by the way the Iraqi president's gesture is presented and framed by the news coverage. But what also strikes him is the new twist that global TV coverage has given the Orientalist narrative by projecting it into the intimate space of his bedroom. For our purposes here, however, there is no need to get engrossed in the details of the Orientalist thesis, or with Wark's particular take on global media. The important thing is to get a feel for Wark's own sensitivity to the way in which a quite specific convergence of factors sparks his interest. As he continues his account:

I turn on the heater in the study – it gets cold in Sydney in August. I could smell trouble. I could sense an event coming on. Months later, I could close the door to this study, with its mountains of old newspapers, videotapes, photocopies with coffee-cup rings all over them. By then this private zone of disorder would look like a pathetic tribute to the carnage in Baghdad. This little room would become a monument made out of trashed information, jerrybuilt concepts, and emergency rations of toxic espresso and vodka, neat. (Wark, 1994, p.7)

Now, this is no absolute beginning, for Wark informs us that he has already had a long interest in global media events, and he also clearly has a background in cultural theory and philosophy, including a grasp of what Deleuze means by an 'event'. But there is a sense here of a fresh start, a moment of inspiration that has clearly played a major role in the genesis of the book *Virtual Geography*. What we should take note of is the way that the 'researcher' allows an incident – something 'in-coming' – to act as provocation. Though it may not be a recipe for domestic bliss, Wark lets the situation enter his world and set him on a new course. What happens is not so much that he sees a TV representation of something happening in the real world and decides he can offer a better explanation. Nor is it simply that a section of the unknown – something hitherto 'unresearched' – is suddenly discovered in the airwaves or in the corner of the bedroom. Rather, a whole set of factors converge, a coincidence which is made up of a fragment of media coverage, the technologies that convey it, the background knowledge and half-formed theories of the researcher, his geographical location, the time of the day, his domestic arrangements, his emotional state, and so on. Or as Derrida once put it: 'Let's just say the event of the coincidence is a place where the innumerable threads of causality fall together, coincide, begin to cross and reconfigure' (cited in Ulmer, 1994, p.201). What Derrida or Deleuze, or Wark himself, calls 'an event' has to be extracted out of all this. The event, in other words, is not

lying in wait: it has to be 'invented' by the researcher or, rather, co-produced by the intersection of researcher and goings-on.

The logic of invention

In the case of a project such as the one Wark sets out on, the 'event' is the problem, or the question he sets out to answer, which in this case might simply be: 'how do we make sense of these strange images which present themselves in my bedroom?' The important thing for us to take out of this is that many of the usual guidelines for doing research are unlikely to help us to generate this sort of question-event, even though they may later be very useful in making sense of it. That is because many approaches to research still work on the assumption that the researcher's prime task is to identify phenomena that already exist 'out there' in the world. This becomes apparent when research guides speak of finding 'gaps in the existing literature' or call for a focused literature search to ascertain that a chosen topic or project hasn't already been 'covered' by another researcher.

But we should not assume that a simple contrast exists between seeing research in terms of events, in which the researcher *makes* connections, and viewing research in terms of a logic of discovery, in which the researcher *finds* gaps to be filled, for the field of research theory and practice is rich and diverse. There is a long history of questioning the notion of uncovering a world 'out there', and even Henri Bergson, writing more than sixty years ago, was not the first to challenge the 'logic of discovery'. There are all kinds of ways in which social science research methodologies pick up on this 'problematizing' of the separation of researchers from world, and draw attention to the implication of researchers in the world in which they working. And yet, as I suggested above, there is also evidence that aspects of the logic of discovery persist in social research advice, and in particular in the way that the originality or moments of inspiration are addressed.

Or, as the case may be, not addressed. It is worth recalling Bergson's claim that a logic of discovery assumes that each of its constitutive moments of discovering or uncovering 'was . . . certain to happen sooner or later' (cited in Deleuze, 1988/1966, p.15). Could it be that this sense of expectation of the new, this confidence in the pre-existence of novelty in the world, explains the rather slender attention devoted to inspiration or originality in most guides to social research? For it seems to be the case that research training in the social sciences or humanities does not dwell on the processes by which areas of interest have initially taken shape, or the moments at which concerns or curiosities have been sparked. Instead, the usual assumption is that the potential researcher arrives with such interests already at hand, and simply in need of development or refinement.

The implication of an approach which hinges on events, one which follows 'a logic of invention' (to use Gregory Ulmer's term), is that by

identifying a particular configuration that would otherwise go unnoticed the researcher actually brings the field or the problem into existence (Ulmer, 1994, pp.47–8). And this means the originary or creative process becomes much more prominent, much more difficult to by-pass or take for granted. Without attentiveness and work on the part of the researcher, the particular moment at which the constitutive elements of a 'problem' coincide would be of no consequence, a non-event, a potentiality left unrealized. In this sense, a general reading around an existing topic or a more focused literature search may contribute a strand to the co-incidence that constitutes a problem or a field of concern, but other more 'extraneous' and less 'disciplined' inputs may also be required to bring a new field 'to life'.

Indeed, the majority of methods texts construct the research process as an essentially orderly one, in which surprises are accommodated, anomalies are accounted for and catastrophes are averted. But as Derrida suggests, something important may be lost by the sort of methodological rigour which 'masters every surprise in advance' (1978/1968, p.172). We have seen from both Wark's example and the work of Derrida and Deleuze that a moment of invention involves a certain abandonment to what is happening, and we have also seen that what it is we are opening up to is a weave of circumstances in which our own particular positioning is just one element. In this sense, as Deleuze argues at length in *Difference and Repetition*, the emergence of a problem or question is always at least in part a gamble, a dice throw, a surrender to chance: 'Ideas are problematic combinations that result from (dice) throws', he suggests. 'The most difficult thing is to make chance an object of affirmation' (1994/1968, p.198).

Ontologies of becoming

But how do we know 'something unforeseeable' is going to show up? How can we have any confidence that there will be happenings or goings-on out of which we might generate the event of a question? To ponder these sorts of question is to be drawn more deeply into the way in which Derrida or Deleuze, or any other philosopher, actually thinks the world works. For if we are to delve into the issue of how and why there are 'goings-on' or 'happenings' in the first place, then we are not just dealing with 'epistemological' issues about the generation of knowledge, or the judgement of what counts as valid knowledge. We find ourselves moving into issues of ontology: the philosophical term for the question of what reality is actually like.

For both Derrida and Deleuze the issue of how we engage with the world – and how we generate new problems – is inseparable from a vision of the generativity or creativity of the world itself. Derrida and Deleuze, and many other philosophers of their generation, are part of a tradition of

ontology

philosophy that sees 'reality' as constantly in motion and ceaselessly self-transforming. This is a tradition which is less interested in what the stuff of the world *is*, and more interested in what the stuff of the world *does*, less concerned with the 'essence' of the forms that comprise the world, and more concerned with the geneses or transmutations that make for a rich variety of forms. Or to put it in the language of philosophy, they see the world in terms of 'becoming' rather than 'being'.

Deleuze and Derrida offer two related but distinguishable versions of an ontology of becoming. There is a tendency in Deleuze to focus more strongly on the way in which transformations come about through an outward movement, by way of a kind of eruption or overflowing. Derrida, on the other hand, tends to place more emphasis on changes that are triggered by incoming elements, movements that are disruptive rather than eruptive (Caputo, 1993, pp.57-9). But both types of movement involve 'openings' of selves or systems to an outside, both entail generative encounters between diverse elements, as we have seen. In this way, Derrida and Deleuze share a view of the world as a groundless and unending weave of likenesses and differences. And in this regard, it is accidents, inter-sections and contaminations rather than 'pure' forms which are considered 'essential' – because they are the unavoidable and utterly necessary processes that make and remake the worlds we inhabit (see Derrida, 1988, p.118; Deleuze, 1994/1968, p.191).

Such an elevation of the 'essential possibility' of chance and contingency distinguishes a Derridean or Deleuzian 'logic of invention' from the more conventional guides to research – with their marginalization of the incidental and accidental. But it is important also to distinguish such an approach from research hinging on a 'Rortyan' play of language. For, as long as play or contingency is confined to language, there are likely to be limitations imposed on the degree to which we allow ourselves to be 'moved' by happenings outside ourselves and/or our spheres of shared language and culture – or outside the range of the human in general.

The flash of lightning, for example, has often been taken as a metaphor for sudden illuminations or connections made in the realms of human thought and deed. But what might happen if we were to move beyond metaphor – with its inference of merely symbolic association – and actually consider the literal implications of the phenomenon of electrical discharges for thinking about connectivity and communication? Consider, then, the following engagement with electrical phenomena by sociologist and feminist theorist, Vicki Kirby:

As I live in something of an eyrie whose panorama includes a significant sweep of the Sydney skyline, I've often watched electrical storms arcing across the city. As I've waited for the next flash, trying to anticipate where it might strike, I've wondered about the erratic logic of this fiery charge whose intent seems as capricious as it is determined. . . . Reading about electricity's predilection for tall buildings, lone trees on golf

courses, tractors and bodies of open water, I . . . learned that these electrical encounters are preceded by quite curious initiation rights. An intriguing communication, a sort of stuttering chatter between ground and sky, appears to precede the actual stroke. A quite spectacular example is the phenomenon of St Elmo's Fire, a visible light show that can sometimes be seen to enliven an object in the moment, just before the moment, of the strike. (Kirby, 2001, pp.59-60)

Kirby goes on to ponder how it is that lightning seems to know in advance how to find the tallest objects to strike:

. . . if we begin by considering a lightning stroke, any old lightning stroke, we will probably assume that it originates in a cloud and is then discharged in the direction of the ground. However, if this directional causality were true, it would be reasonable to ask how lightning can be appraised of its most economical route to the earth before it has been tested. (Kirby, 2001, p.60)

Now you might be wondering what a *social* scientist is doing getting caught up in a purely physical phenomenon such as lightning. And it is not how lightning is represented, or its power as a figure of speech that interests Kirby: it is the whole complex and mysterious network of 'communication' involved in the electrical storm. Much of Kirby's prior work draws on Derrida to explore the way in which systems of language or communication operate, including the question of whether the messages that animate living bodies can be considered as a kind of language. With the lightning example, Kirby pushes this possibility still further, as she begins to ponder what the paradoxes of electronic interconnectivity at a distance might mean for understanding 'communication' in all its other manifestations.

Where is Kirby's inquiry into lightning leading? It seems too early to tell, for here is an 'external provocation' still in its formative moments, a thought-event not yet fully worked through. As in the case of McKenzie Wark's account, the details of what lightning can or can't do are less important to us than the ability of the 'researcher' to recognize a coincidence or convergence of disparate 'goings-on'. What the story suggests is that Kirby's receptiveness to information that first appears to belong to a field utterly alien to her own is tied up with the particular ontology she embraces. Because Kirby, like Derrida, views the world in terms of complex interweavings rather than discrete objects or categories, there is always a potential opening to make strange and unpredictable connections. Moreover, there appears to be no limit, no final cut-off point as to the source of these concurrences.

In other words, the philosophical position we hold has very important implications for our receptiveness and ability to process novel experiences and information. And this in turn plays a big part in the shaping of the field of potential research topics and questions. According to a Deleuzian or a Derridean logic of invention I have been suggesting, new questions are

generated when something draws us out of ourselves, out of our usual circle of thought, ideas and concerns. A philosophy which sees such openings and interconnectivities as constitutive of the world in general – as an ‘essential possibility’ – is going to find it easier to embrace this sort of occurrence than a philosophy which privileges given forms or appearances, or a philosophy that privileges the contingency of language, as against a more generalized play of differences and similarities.

Events and non-events

A sociologist being inspired by lightning is an extreme case, even more so perhaps than a cultural theorist being galvanized by an encounter with a dictator in his bedroom. The convergences and overlappings that might draw research in new directions, however, need not be as dramatic as either of these cases. What we have to remember – a point made by Derrida, Deleuze and all the other philosophers of becoming – is that coincidence and juxtaposition, chance and novelty, are quite normal and often mundane. We do not have to go far to find them, and they do not have to be earth-shattering or mind-blowing. They may draw us only a degree or two from our normal course, and they may transform our thought processes in only the subtlest ways. But whether they are mild or momentous, we need to be attuned to goings-on – ready and willing to extract an event from the flow of mere happenings. As Derrida puts it: ‘Not just any relationships can produce a work, an event. Coincidence must be loved, received, treated in a certain way. The question is, in which way?’ (cited in Ulmer, 1994, pp.226–7).

In which way indeed? It’s a good question, but I’m afraid its one for which Derrida has no final or absolute answers. And neither, it seems, do any other philosophers with similar leanings. Working out rules, laws or principles for dealing with contingencies, as we will see, is just too much of a contradiction in terms. Let me try to ease us into this issue by way of one more example, this time a tale from my own research history.

I had been doing a lot of work on cybertecture, concentrating on the ways in which new electronic technologies affect our experience of the world in general and nature in particular. At the same time, but on a different tack, I had also been thinking about a much earlier technological ‘medium’ – the medium of the sailing ship – and how linking the world by sea affected the way the world was experienced. Opening up the world through cybernetic and nautical ‘media’ had a particular significance to me because I was living at Europe’s antipodes in the South West Pacific – which sometimes seems like a long way from where the most important things happen.

Like many cybertecture enthusiasts, I took inspiration from the 1982 film *Blade Runner*, with its striking depictions of a post-human future. So, partly for work, partly for pleasure, I decided to read the novel on which

Blade Runner was based – Philip K. Dick’s 1968 science fiction classic *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1993/1968). To my surprise, at the front of the novel was the following Reuters news release, dated 1966:

A turtle which explorer Captain Cook gave to the King of Tonga in 1777 died yesterday. It was nearly 200 years old. The animal, called Tu’imalila, died at the Royal Palace ground in the Tongan capital of Nuku, Alofa. The people of Tonga regarded the animal as a chief and special keepers were appointed to look after it. It was blinded in a bush fire a few years ago, Tonga Radio said Tu’imalila’s carcass would be sent to the Auckland Museum in New Zealand.

Well, I can’t remember exactly my domestic arrangements or even where I was at the time, but I do remember that it felt like an originary moment. Auckland is my home town, the Auckland Museum a place where I had both played and worked. I could even picture the turtle in its tableau in the natural history hall. Suddenly, all the disparate trails of my favourite topics converged on a single point: cybertecture, maritime exploration, and representations of nature all collided on my own doorstep. A research project beckoned.

To cut a short story even shorter, I pursued as many of the leads as I could, but the particular and irreducible moment of their convergence in that book’s epigraph, in my hands, there in Auckland, somehow failed to ignite. In the form of that specific intersection, there was simply not enough to grasp me or draw me in further. I did bundle all these themes into a conference paper which seemed to keep a small roomful of people mildly amused for twenty minutes, but it never got written up. All was not lost, however. I went on to make reference to *Blade Runner* in an article about rethinking the body in the era of digital communication. I also wrote a piece about the ‘imagining’ of cyberspace and how this linked up with accounts and memories of early European exploration of the Pacific. Somewhat to my surprise, this article generated an online art exhibition about digital culture and its relationship to islands and oceans. But neither androids nor turtles played any part whatsoever.

In effect, what I did was to backtrack and unravel some of the strands that made for Tu’imalila ‘convergence’, strands that I was then able to weave together in alternative ways, to produce quite different ‘events’; the point being that not all conjunctions or encounters carry the same potential. There are events, but there are also, for our intents, ‘non-events’. And, indeed, a philosophy of becoming that depicts reality as a restless mesh of cross-cutting forces and materials by definition offers the researcher or thinker more ‘goings-on’ than can ever be on-going. A world of almost limitless potential is, unavoidably, a world in which only certain possibilities can be acted upon. But it is also a world in which dropped strands can be picked up again; one in which threads or tangents or lines of interest are always capable of being woven together in more than one way.

non-events

Decision time

If we are consistently subjected to contingent goings-on, if the threads of our lives are forever entangling themselves with other strands of existence, you might be wondering how are we to decide which encounters and coincidences to take seriously. How do we judge which lines to pursue, which solicitings we will allow to lead us astray? Amidst all the uncertainties we have entertained throughout this chapter, there *are* some 'irreducibles', at least a couple of 'points of order' which follow, inevitably, from the sort of ontology of becoming we have been exploring. And the first of these is simply that there is no escaping the need for judgement on our part. This goes for theorists and for researchers as it goes for everyone else caught up in the becomings of everyday life. 'Events press hard upon us and demand a decision, a finite cut in the flow of events, a response...' as Caputo puts it (1993, p.106). Such decisions may be minor or momentous, subtle or seismic in their implications, but the simple fact of being part of a world of endless possibilities means that we must choose some paths at the expense of others.

The second point that proceeds, no less ineluctably, from viewing the world as a weave of differences and similarities, is the impossibility of disentangling ourselves. One thing we cannot do, one trick we cannot perform, is to extract ourselves entirely from the mesh of worldly goings-on – and view them from a distance. To put it simply, there is no place above, outside or beyond that is not itself tied up with the rest of the world, that is not itself always already made up of comings and goings, meetings and mixtures. Having nowhere to stand outside the fray also means that there is no ground from which to couch laws or principles of judgement that are beyond circumstances, or applicable to every eventuality. And where does this leave us, as Caputo asks? 'If judgement is unable to start out from the principle, unable to proceed from on high, then how are we to judge, how are we to ride out and absorb the shocks and jolts of factual life?' (Caputo, 1993, p.97). Or, more pertinently, how are we going to spend our inevitably limited research time or money wisely?

Where we are left – without universal laws – is to make our judgements on the spot, in the thick of it, from within the tangle of goings-on. In other words, we have to improvise, to make our decisions out of the resources we have at hand. What is most obviously and immediately at hand is our own experience of past events. After all, we have ourselves been forged, shaped and reshaped out of a lifetime of encounters and engagements: to lesser or greater levels we have all been 'seasoned by events' (Caputo, 1993, p.100). For all that each new configuration of forces and elements that we enter into has some degree of novelty, it will also have aspects of familiarity: characteristics or contours recognizable from prior experience.

Our previous 'experience' may be 'at hand' in more ways than one, however. What is suggested by Derrida's 'animal movement', or by

Deleuze's reference to the 'affective tones' in which we might experience an encounter, is that tussling with a world excessively rich in possibility may involve more than just the 'consciousness' we tend to equate with 'thought'. Deleuze is quite explicit about this: 'body, passions, sensuous interests', he argues, 'are not diversions', they are 'real forces that *form* thought' (1983/1962, p.103). Indeed, for those philosophers of becoming who do not limit the interwoven forces and agencies that interest them to the realms of language or culture, there is no particular barrier to the idea of a dispersal of thought through bodies or different sensory modes; nor to drawing on strands of research outside the conventional range of the social sciences. In this regard, some social scientists have begun to tap into evidence from the life sciences which suggests that human beings and other organisms record experiences and knowledge in ways that include much of the body besides the brain (see Thrift, 2001). New understandings of the way that viscera, skin, posture and gesture are all implicated in the processing of information is giving renewed credence to the idea that emotion, instinct or gut-feeling deserve a role in human judgement.

But just as there are no ultimate guidelines lying *outside* the messy world of circumstances and eventualities to guarantee our judgements, neither should we expect to find certainty *within*. 'Hearing out' the deep recesses of our bodies may have a previously undervalued contribution to add, but turning inward is ultimately no more of a foolproof register for sifting and sorting out promising insights than looking outward. If gut-feelings were infallible, my *Blade Runner*-exploration/turtle-android configuration would have burgeoned into something rich and bountiful. And there would probably be a lot fewer tragic love songs in the world.

There is another way of helping judge 'event-worthy' goings-on and in-comings from within the thick of it; however, and it is one that is almost banal in its familiarity. Just as contemporary philosophies of becoming conceive of a distribution of sensation and thought across interconnected body parts, so too is agency and thought dispersed across networks of thinking beings. It is hardly necessary to remind social scientists that any thinker or researcher is always already implicated in social or cultural networks. If we need assistance in judging the potentiality of 'whatever gives', in distilling events from a sea of goings-on, then the obvious place to turn is those who have been through similar processes: those who are 'matured by events' (Caputo, 1993, p.100). These others may be colleagues we encounter 'in the flesh', or they may be conversants we engage with in more dispersed ways, by tapping into experience and knowledge that is distributed through networks of bibliographic or electronic texts. What the complexity of 'happenings' implies is that no single perspective is likely to provide all the input we need, and once more we might consider the importance of redundancy, of coming at the same question from a multitude of angles. What this might mean, in the case of sifting one research question from many, is tapping into a range of opinions: voices and eyes (and other senses) that are positioned at various points in the problem-field

we are composing; people with different angles, different interests, different takes on 'what gives'.

But, as is the case with our more 'visceral' leads, a network of 'informed others' can offer assistance but not guarantees to the decision-making process. Given the absence of infallibility, the process of judgement is inevitably permeated by risk as well as promise – by the hazard, at very least, of pursuing a less fulfilling and productive research path over a potentially richer vein. And it is in this regard that the timing of our most playful and experimental phases is important. While there is no stage of a research project in which we would wish to close ourselves completely to goings-on around us, or to stop asking questions, there are clearly times when the consequences of vacillations, 'wrong turns' or 'dead-ends' are much less of a threat than they are at others.

Indeed, experimental evidence suggests that intuitive judgement – decision-making that uses the full range of senses – is at its most acute under conditions when stress or pressure is minimal. Such judgement, it has been said, 'is founded on a kind of combinatorial playfulness that is only possible when the consequences of error are not overpowering' (J.S. Bruner, cited in Bastick, 1982, p.350). A certain passivity, a state of relaxation, even dispersed attention, it appears, is most conducive to the moment of 'insight' (recall McKenzie Wark in his cosy domicile, Vicki Kirby watching a storm ...). By this logic, we would expect the early stages of the research project – perhaps even before the research is a project in any formal sense – to be most conducive to such moments, at least more so than the times when deadlines are pressing or funds running low. But as you will see from later chapters, there are other junctures when possibilities open out again, when judgements between competing possibilities are again called for.

What should not be passed over lightly – even in the most relaxed moments of the research project – is the risk of coming adrift, of losing our bearings entirely. Gayatri Spivak once pointed out, in a rather marvellous introduction to Derrida's work, that deconstruction's groundlessness, its 'prospect of never hitting bottom' is itself intoxicating (1976, p.xxvii). It is a pleasure, a temptation that deconstruction has to attend to, has to deconstruct further, as Spivak puts it. This is also an important issue for those who are influenced by Deleuze, for there are some readings of his work that seem to assert such a proliferation of life-affirming possibilities that we are left wondering if there is ever a time to settle down. After declaring his enthusiasm for the work of Deleuze, John Caputo eventually confesses: 'I find it too exhausting, all the outpouring and overflowing, all the firing away of forces night and day' (1993, p.53). Even Deleuze, however, concedes that there is one way of doing science or doing research that is good for 'inventing problems', but quite another way of going about things that is necessary for actually solving these problems. There is a time, he argues, when an 'organization of work' is needed, a task for which we need much more formalized procedures than intuition and open-ended experimentation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987/1980, p.374).

intuitive
judgement

sense of obligation

Conclusion

This sense of obligation or responsiveness is one of the implications that can be drawn from a philosophy of becoming. For, if the world is depicted as generative and generous, then the subjects who are caught up in this world, constituted by this world, may take it upon themselves to behave 'generously'. It is interesting to note how Derrida's own writing over the course of his working life has shifted from engagements with important philosophical and literary texts to a more direct focus on pressing political and ethical concerns. He offers us clues about this turn, when he suggests that 'the political and historical urgency of what is befalling us should, one will say, tolerate less patience, fewer detours and less bibliophilic discretion. Less esoteric rarity. This is no longer the time to take one's time ...' (1997, p.79).

It is this urgency, Derrida continues, that obliges us to make decisions, to make choices about the work we are going to do – even though we are likely to experience these judgements as 'cutting, conclusive, decisive, heart-rending' (1997, p.79). In our own, perhaps more modest, way, as researchers caught up in a project of our own invention, there will also undoubtedly be a sense of urgency, sometimes because of logistical demands and sometimes because of the nature of our concerns. Here, too, a little heart-rending might be also be required, for there is unavoidably a time when several possibilities must give way to a single problem, when a question must learn to enjoy some solitude.

As we have seen, the philosophical opening of word to world has important implications for what might count as 'available resources and

materials' for posing problems and composing questions. This does not discount Rorty's play of language as a source of fresh perspectives. What it does, rather, is to try to extend this play – and all its generative potentials – into the widest sphere imaginable. But as you will have gathered, a radical opening of possibilities for posing questions does not necessarily make the task of the researcher easier or simpler, for our immersion in the play of the world presents demands of its own. The necessity of decision-making is a reminder that neither the foregrounding of chance, nor the acknowledgement of our bodily implication in the issues and problems that appeal to us relieves us of the need for rigour and attentiveness. Indeed, one of most challenging aspects of the call for inventiveness that might be distilled from the work of Derrida and Deleuze is that it calls for playfulness *and* vigilance, a kind of relaxed receptivity *and* a willingness to pursue what takes a hold of us with unrelenting effort and stringency.

There are, however, further challenges that arise from seeing the world as a weave of differences and similarities that we have scarcely touched upon. We have seen that a dispersed or distributed view of thought and agency draws physical bodies into the event of posing problems and generating questions. But 'bodies' too are differentiated, and have their own particular characteristics. While the work of both Derrida and Deleuze seems to offer some intriguing possibilities for exploring the differentiation of bodies and its consequences for generating ideas and problems, it is debatable whether either of these theorists has pursued these possibilities as far as they might. There are other philosophers, however, who have taken the question of our embodiment and the embodiment of our questioning much further, and it is these theorists to whom we turn in the following chapter.

Further reading

There is a great deal of writing about both Deleuze and Derrida, though there is surprisingly little work that talks about them together. John Caputo's *Against Ethics* (Indiana University Press, 1993) is one exception, and a lively and heartfelt one at that. Chapter 5, 'The epoch of judgement' is particularly useful for thinking about events. Deleuze's concern with the dynamic and playful nature of the world is explored in a number of the essays in *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory and Futures*, edited by Elizabeth Grosz (Cornell University Press, 1999b), especially Chapter 2 by Manuel De Landa: 'Deleuze, diagrams, and the open-ended becoming of the world'. Though it is a demanding read, Christopher Johnson's *System and Writing in the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge University Press, 1993) makes a strong case that Derrida, too, is interested in the play of the world, and not just the play of language.

3

A body of questions

Gillian Rose

Introduction

The previous two chapters have considered the work of a range of contemporary, mainly European, philosophers and have explored the consequences of their thought for the process of asking questions. The chapters suggested that their work can be distinguished according to how they rate the possibility of a radically new question producing unthinkable new answers. For Rorty and for Foucault, if for rather different reasons, this possibility is limited. Rorty's central claim is that, since 'language goes all the way down', questions can only be a form of redescription; and, while redescription allows for new kinds of understanding to develop, it is always caught in already existing language. Foucault, certainly in his earlier work, also saw language – or at least, discourse – as powerfully all-enveloping. He argued that what it was possible to say outside discourse was inevitably restricted. The philosophers explored in Chapter 2, however, have a rather different emphasis. Both Derrida and Deleuze – again, despite their differences – choose to think more about the instabilities of language and the world. Although not denying the centrality of language, discourse and meaning to human life, they suggest that certain sorts of play and experimentation can be inventive of the new, not just a metaphorical redescription of it. Some risky encounters can really step outside language and in their newness break out of the prison house of what is already said and done.

This chapter will pursue this discussion of language, knowledge, questions and newness. It will explore how questions can be at once intelligible and open to the unfamiliar. It will do so in a particular context though. What I want to do is work with the philosophies of Elizabeth Grosz and particularly of Luce Irigaray, both of whom have thought long and hard about the relationship between language and what lies beyond its limits. (In this chapter, I assume that language and knowledge are so inextricably bound together as to be the same thing.) Grosz and Irigaray are concerned about how we can think things radically new, but also about how our existing understandings constrain that process. So I'll examine how they negotiate that relation between what is known and what is new. Their philosophy lies at the juncture between longstanding feminist

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