

# An Analysis of Deleuze's Concept of Potentiality

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**Abstract:** "Potentiality" (virtuel) can be seen as Deleuze's conception of "existence," and understanding potentiality is key to understanding Deleuze's monist ontology. In Deleuze's understanding, "potentiality" refers to the inner possibilities or potentials that are not limited or determined by reality or external factors. He believes that we should focus on the potentiality rather than being limited by reality or surface appearances. In this paper, I will explore Deleuze's concept of potentiality, analyze its role in Deleuze's philosophy, and consider its impact on philosophy, social sciences, and cultural studies.

**Keywords:** Potentiality, actuality, virtuality, possibility

## 1. Introduction

There is a certain conceptual relationship between Gilles Deleuze's potentiality and the philosophical thought of French philosopher Henri Bergson. In Bergson's philosophy, "potentiality" is always a key term and frequently appears in many of his works. In his philosophy, Bergson proposes the concept of "creative evolution," which holds that the evolution of life is a process of constantly creating new forms, and that this creative power comes from the potentiality within life or the "inner force" of life (*élan vital*). According to Bergson, "the original driving force of biological evolution is the 'primitive impulse of life' inherent in organisms themselves. This internal factor, influenced by external conditions, leads to changes in the evolutionary path and changes in biological species and forms." [1]

Understanding Bergson's concept of potentiality cannot be separated from his "cone of time" model. According to Bergson's theory, time is not a simple linear flow, but a diffusing cone that unfolds from the future to the present. The bottom of the cone represents the future, the tip of the cone represents the present, and the side of the cone represents the past. Bergson believed that we can only look up from the bottom of the cone, and can only see a part of the possibilities of the future, but not the entire future. At the same time, we can only look up from the side of the cone, and can only see a part of the past that has already happened, but cannot return to the entire past. The past here is not something that once existed, but a present existence. In other words, the past as a whole is always with us, and it is constantly involved in the generation of each present moment. The new generation is then incorporated into the past, adding content to its entirety. This existence of the past itself is what Bergson calls "potentiality."

Deleuze was inspired by Bergson's philosophy and proposed his own concept of "potentiality," believing that this internal possibility and potentiality is generated by some kind of internal power of life, which can be understood as Bergson's "*élan vital*." However, the difference between Deleuze and Bergson is that Deleuze believes that potentiality is not limited to the scope of life, but universally exists in all things, including non-living matter and abstract concepts.

In addition, Deleuze criticized some of Bergson's views, arguing that while Bergson emphasized the flow of time and creative evolution, he did not provide an answer as to how life can transcend time and change. Deleuze attempted to explore this question through his philosophical thinking and proposed a new understanding of time and change, such as his "time-difference" theory. Therefore, although Deleuze was influenced by Bergson, he also surpassed Bergson's philosophy to a certain extent.

## 2. Deleuze's definition of the concept of "potential"

Potentiality is a core concept in Deleuze's philosophy, which describes the deep structures of life and reality. Potentiality is a transcendent description that interprets the possibilities of the current state.

In Deleuze's philosophy, potentiality is understood as a concept that corresponds to actualization. Actualization is a state that has already been realized, while potentiality is a state that has not yet been realized. Deleuze often uses the concept of "potentiality" in his philosophical works to describe the possibilities and potentialities that exist between things and phenomena. He believes that things are not eternal and unchanging, but are constantly changing and evolving in a changing world. The root of these changes and evolutions lies in the potentiality that exists in things and phenomena, which constantly change in the world and may lead to the emergence of new things, relationships, and structures.

Deleuze distinguishes potentiality into two types: actual potentiality and virtual potentiality. Actual potentiality is a potentiality with practical meaning, which exists between things and phenomena that have already appeared, and is constantly interacting and changing between these things and phenomena. Virtual potentiality, on the other hand, is a future possibility that exists in the unrealized potentiality between things and phenomena, and is constantly changing and evolving in these unrealized possibilities. Deleuze believes that there is a dynamic relationship between potentiality and actualization, in which the virtual possibilities in the potential state can constantly transform into concrete things in the actual state, and the things in the actual state can in turn affect the virtual possibilities in the potential state. This relationship is not linear, but a non-hierarchical complex system.

It should be noted that "potentiality is not possibility." [2] Because potentiality refers to the same-form identity in concepts, while possibility refers to the pure complexity in ideas. This complexity fundamentally excludes the prerequisite of identity. In other words, potentiality refers to the ability that an individual or thing already possesses internally to realize in the present or future, while possibility refers to uncertain situations or outcomes caused by external environment. The difference between these two concepts is that potentiality is an ability that already exists within an individual, while possibility is a result of uncertainty in the external environment.

Deleuze himself has emphasized the difference between potentiality and possibility more than once: "In all of this, the only danger is to confuse the potential with the possible. Because possibility is opposed to the real, the possible process is a 'realization.' Conversely, potentiality is not opposed to the real, it already has full reality in itself. Its process is an 'actualization.' If you think this is just a dispute at the level of language, you're seriously mistaken: this involves existence itself." [3] Deleuze pointed out that it is very dangerous to confuse potentiality and possibility, as they have different characteristics and meanings. Possibility is opposed to actuality, so the process of possibility is a kind of "realization," while potentiality is not opposed to actuality, but has full reality. The process of potentiality is actualization. Therefore, when we consider existence, we must realize that the concept of existence is a primitive event, a pure action or leap that is always happening behind us. This existence is subject to the law of all or nothing. In addition, potentiality is a characteristic of concepts, while existence is produced based on its reality. Existence is produced according to a time-space inherent in the concept. Therefore, there is a clear difference between potentiality and existence, which is determined by the concept.

Additionally, Deleuze emphasizes that potential and actual are not the same. Potential refers to the pure complexity of ideas, while actual is imagined as possible resemblances. Deleuze believes that the actualization of potentiality is always caused by difference, divergence, or differentiation. Actualization simultaneously cuts off its relationship with similarity as a process and identity as a principle. The actual entities are never similar to the potentialities they actualize. Therefore, actualization and differentiation are always true creation. It does not arise from limiting a pre-existing possibility. Deleuze also talks about the actualization of potential things, which is always about creating discrete lines that correspond to and yet are not similar to the complex potentialities. Potential things have the reality of a task to be accomplished and the reality of a problem to be solved. The solution is not similar to the conditions of the problem. Deleuze believes that the differences and repetitions existing in potentiality lay the foundation for the actualization process or the process of creative differentiation, replacing the possibility of identity and similarity. The latter can only cause pseudo-movement, which is the actualization of abstract restrictions. Therefore, Deleuze believes that reality can only be truly created and developed through the continuous evolution of difference and repetition.

In Deleuze's view, potentiality is one of the basic characteristics of life and reality. The essence of life and reality is multiplicity, change, and fluidity, and potentiality expresses the possibility of these multiplicities and changes. In this sense, potentiality is a process-based description, a dynamic and fluid concept. "A life contains only potentiality. It consists of potentiality, events, and singularities. We call it potentiality not because it lacks reality, but because something is thrown into a process of actualization in a plane that gives it its own reality. Internal events are actualized in the state of things

and life, which makes it happen. ... Events or singularities give all their potentialities to the plane, just as the inherent plane gives potential events complete reality." [4] In Deleuze's philosophy, life is a potentiality, not a determined entity or fixed essence. Deleuze believes that life should be understood as a power that contains all potentialities, which are infinite and unrealized. The potentiality of life is diverse and includes countless possibilities, which constantly emerge and disappear in the continuous flow and change of life. Therefore, in Deleuze's view, the essence of life is not a determined entity, but a virtual potential force that can constantly emerge and actualize. Deleuze's concept of potentiality emphasizes the importance of potentiality, and the potentiality of life is infinite, capable of creating and realizing new possibilities. The creativity and innovation of life are driven by the realization and deployment of potentiality. Therefore, according to Deleuze, we should explore the true meaning and value of life by focusing on its potentiality and potential possibilities.

In summary, Deleuze's concept of potentiality is closely related to life. He believes that the essence of life is not a determined entity, but an infinite potentiality and possibility. The creativity and innovation of life are driven by the realization and deployment of potentiality. Therefore, we should explore the true meaning and value of life by focusing on its potentiality and potential possibilities.

### **3. The Meaning and Importance of Deleuze's Concept of Potentiality**

Firstly, the concept of the virtual occupies a crucial position in Deleuze's philosophy. Deleuze's concept of the virtual is closely related to his theories of the transcendental field and the plane of immanence, which together form the foundation of his philosophy. The transcendental field "is actually the univocal being that Spinoza called substance, the unique matter. But this matter is neither a direct experience nor an abstract concept; it is a field of flux where everything changes. The diversity that is affirmed by these changes is a virtual power, which is real but not actual, a reserve of reality for the future." [5]

Deleuze's concept of the immanent plane is an important concept in his philosophy, referring to the internal logic and operational mode of a particular field or practice. The immanent plane emphasizes the self-organizing and self-developing ability of a field or practice, that is, its inner potential and possibilities. According to Deleuze, every field or practice has its own immanent plane, which is not determined by external forces, but achieved through internal self-organization and self-development. The concept of the immanent plane corresponds to another concept of Deleuze, the transcendent plane. The transcendent plane refers to the external influences and constraints of a field or practice, including political, economic, cultural and other forces. The immanent plane and the transcendent plane interact with each other, but the immanent plane plays a decisive role in the development and change of a field or practice. Deleuze applied the concept of the immanent plane to various fields and practices, including philosophy, literature, art, science, etc. He believed that by exploring and discovering the immanent plane, innovative and transformative ideas and practices could be created, promoting social and cultural progress and development. At the same time, he also emphasized the interaction and opposition between the immanent plane and the transcendent plane, and believed that to achieve real change and innovation, it is necessary to focus on both the immanent plane and the transcendent plane, and strive to break through the constraints and limitations of the transcendent plane.

Deleuze believed that the pre-established field exists on the plane of immanence, which is a domain that is innate, eternal, infinite, and not limited by time and space. Both the concept of the virtual and the concept of the pre-established field indicate that something has untapped potential or development possibilities, which exist in the virtual domain. The concept of the virtual emphasizes this potential or possibility even more strongly, and is therefore an important complement and development of the concept of the pre-established field. Deleuze believed that the pre-established field is a relatively abstract and obscure concept that needs to be concretized and expressed through the concept of the virtual. The concept of the virtual helps us better understand and explain the various possibilities and changes in the pre-established field, so as to better exploit and utilize these untapped possibilities. Therefore, Deleuze's concept of the virtual and the concept of the pre-established field have a complementary and mutually reinforcing relationship, forming an important theoretical framework in Deleuze's philosophy.

Second, the significance of the virtual lies in its revelation of the deep structure of life and reality. "The virtual is the elementary basis, or soil, of the real." [6] Deleuze believed that life and reality are not static, fixed entities, but rather a plural and constantly changing process. The essence of life and reality is change and fluidity, and potentiality expresses this possibility of change and fluidity. In this sense,

potentiality reveals the plurality and variability of life and reality, emphasizing their dynamic nature. Moreover, the concept of potentiality has been applied in cultural theory and artistic creation. The pair of reality and potentiality has been applied to filmmaking. For example, "Andrei Tarkovsky, in *Ivan's Childhood*, depicts the circulation and permutation of dream images and reality images, the interspersing and overlapping of these dreams and reality, constantly attempting to retrace the past, and makes us ponder the meaning of reality images that carry these memories. Time and memory are also Tarkovsky's film themes." [7]

In terms of cultural theory, Deleuze's concept of potentiality is used to analyze and explain the diversity and variability of cultural phenomena, suggesting that culture is not fixed or static, but driven by potential forces and possibilities. In artistic creation, Deleuze's concept of potentiality is used to encourage innovation and experimentation, suggesting that artists can create new art forms and styles by exploring potential possibilities. For example, in Deleuze's famous book *"A Thousand Plateaus"* co-authored with Félix Guattari, potential connections between animals, plants, humans, and cultures are explored, highlighting the importance of potentiality for cultural innovation. In cultural studies and criticism, Deleuze's concept of potentiality is also used to analyze and explain the diversity and variability of culture.

In the field of art, Deleuze's concept of potentiality is widely applied. For example, in music creation, Deleuze's concept of potentiality is used to encourage musicians to explore new sounds and musical forms, creating new musical experiences. In visual arts, Deleuze's concept of potentiality is also used to encourage artists to explore new art forms and ways of expression, going beyond traditional artistic languages and forms.

In summary, Deleuze's concept of potentiality plays an important role in cultural theory and artistic creation, encouraging people to explore and realize potential possibilities, and create new cultural and artistic forms.

Finally, the concept of the virtual is applied to social and political theory. Deleuze believed that both society and politics are fluid processes, characterized by change and diversity. The virtual can be used to describe the possibilities of this change and diversity.

In the field of sociology, he argued that society should not be seen as a static structure but rather as driven by potentialities and possibilities that emerge and disappear in its flow and change. He introduced the concept of "body without organs," which suggests that the relationship between society and the body is dynamic and changing. The body without organs refers to a body that has been liberated from specific physiological and social features, becoming an organic, shapeless entity with infinite potentialities, shaped by different forces and processes.

In political philosophy, he emphasized the concepts of resistance and rebellion, suggesting that people can overthrow existing power relations and establish new political orders by exploring and realizing virtual possibilities. His criticism of power relations is also an important part of Deleuze's political philosophy, as he believed that modern social structures suppress people's potentialities. Therefore, Deleuze's concept of the virtual is applied to social and political theory to explore the diversity, variability, and potentiality of social and political orders, encouraging people to explore possibilities beyond the current social and political status quo and promoting social and political change and innovation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In summary, Deleuze's concept of the virtual is a deeper and more detailed understanding of reality. It emphasizes the potential that already exists in reality and the process of transforming this potential into actuality through continuous exploration and practice. The development of this concept not only helps people recognize their own potential, but also their connection and communication with the world and society, thereby expanding their knowledge and thinking.

In today's society, people face increasingly complex and diverse challenges and opportunities, and need to constantly explore and practice to discover and unleash their potential to cope with change and challenges. In this process, Deleuze's concept of the virtual provides us with an important tool and guiding method, encouraging us to explore and discover our potential, as well as the connection and communication with our bodies, the world, and society.

Of course, the concept of the virtual also has limitations and expansiveness.

Firstly, the lack of practicality: Deleuze's concepts are very abstract and theoretical, lacking practical operability, and are difficult to transform into guiding principles for practical action and policy.

Secondly, too idealistic: Deleuze's potential concept emphasizes the potential and possibility of the body, but it is too idealistic and theoretical, ignoring the limitations and challenges of reality, and is difficult to achieve.

Thirdly, ignoring power structures: Deleuze's potential concept emphasizes individual freedom and creativity but ignores the power structures and inequalities that exist in society and politics, lacking in-depth analysis of power relations.

Finally, a lack of consideration for history and culture: Deleuze's concepts are often based on abstract philosophical and scientific ideas, lacking consideration for history and culture, making it difficult to adapt to specific situations in different social and cultural contexts.

To compensate for the limitations of the concept of the virtual and expand its application areas, further exploration and research are needed in several areas.

Firstly, it is necessary to delve into the theoretical foundations and philosophical meanings of the concept of the virtual, exploring its relationship and differences with other philosophical concepts.

Secondly, it is necessary to combine specific practical cases and social reality to explore the practical value and application methods of the concept of the virtual.

Finally, cross-disciplinary research and dialogue with other fields are needed to expand the application areas and contribution value of the concept of the virtual.

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