This book offers the first extended comparison of the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and David Hume.

Jeffrey Bell argues that Deleuze’s early work on Hume was instrumental to Deleuze’s formulation of the problems and concepts that would remain the focus of his entire corpus. Reading Deleuze’s work in light of Hume’s influence, along with a comparison of Deleuze’s work with William James, Henri Bergson, and others, sets the stage for a vigorous defence of his philosophy against a number of recent criticisms. It also extends the field of Deleuze studies by showing how Deleuze’s thought can clarify and contribute to the work being done in political theory, cultural studies, and history, particularly the history of the Scottish Enlightenment.

By engaging Deleuze’s thought with the work of Hume, this book clarifies and supports the work of Deleuze and exemplifies the continuing relevance of Hume’s thought to a number of contemporary debates.

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Deleuze’s Hume

Philosophy, Culture and the Scottish Enlightenment

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Abbreviations


Deleuze begins the preface to the 1987 English language edition of *Dialogues* with the assertion 'I have always felt that I am an empiricist, that is, a pluralist' (D vii). A few lines later, Deleuze details what this means: a pluralist assumes that the abstract 'must itself be explained,' and explained so as to 'find the conditions under which something new is produced (creativity)' (ibid.). Thirty-four years earlier, in his first published book, *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, Deleuze found just such an explanation in Hume.1 With the premise that ‘Mankind is an inventive species’ (T 484), Hume set out in his *Treatise of Human Nature* to explain how the principles of human nature can account for this inventiveness. More precisely, Hume argues that the principles of association draw relationships between ideas in the mind, ideas that are themselves copies of corresponding impressions, and as a result of these relationships and the easy transition from one idea to another they facilitate, what is produced is the belief in causation and necessity, a belief that is irreducible to the impressions themselves. As Hume puts it, the belief in causal relations enables the mind to go ‘beyond what is immediately present to the senses’ (T 73).

Hume’s approach, although profoundly influential, has nonetheless received significant criticism. For our purposes the most warranted of these criticisms are those of William James and Henri Bergson. For James, who like Deleuze claimed to be an empiricist and a pluralist, Hume was wrong to do ‘away with the connections of things . . . [and to insist] most on the disjunctions’ (James 1987, 1160). In particular, Hume wrongly insists upon the disjunctions between impressions, arguing that it is contrary to experience to assert, as Hume does, that ‘as all distinct ideas are separable from each other, and as the ideas of cause and effect are evidently distinct,’ there is consequently no intrinsic connection between these ideas (T 79). This was precisely why the belief in a causal connection goes ‘beyond what is immediately present to the senses.’ Hume’s ‘preposterous view,’ as James characterizes it, is typical of the ‘intellectualist method [which] pulverize[s]
perception and triumph[s] over life’ (James 1987, 1084). James argues that his radical empiricism ‘does full justice to conjunctive relations’ (ibid. 1161), relations that are experienced in what he calls ‘pure experience.’ Bergson also finds in Hume’s approach a ‘capital error’ in that he substitutes for the ‘continuity of becoming, which is the living reality, a discontinuous multiplicity of elements, inert and juxtaposed’ (Bergson [1896] 1988, 134). For Bergson, a true empiricism is one that seeks ‘to get as near to the original itself as possible, to search deeply into its life’ (Bergson [1903] 1999, 36–7), and this is done by way of intuition, which is just ‘the kind of intellectual sympathy by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible’ (ibid. 23–4).

Since it draws significantly on Hume’s work, Deleuze’s project might therefore be open to similar criticisms, which would be particularly troubling given the importance of Bergson’s thought for Deleuze. Yet there is a further, perhaps more damning problem for Deleuze’s empiricism, namely the dualism Deleuze readily admits is entailed by empiricism. Deleuze is quite forthright: ‘empiricism,’ he asserts in Empiricism and Subjectivity, ‘will not be correctly defined except by means of dualism’ (ES 108). Therein lies the problem, however, for a number of recent commentators on Deleuze’s philosophy. Alain Badiou, for instance, finds the virtual/actual dualism in Deleuze’s philosophy – what Badiou calls the ‘unthinkable Two’ (Badiou 2000, 53) – especially problematic. In short, Deleuze ultimately fails in his effort to reconcile the dualism of empiricism with his assertion that being is univocal. We will address this and other criticisms in due course, but it must first be noted that despite the claim that empiricism will ‘not be correctly defined except by means of dualism,’ Deleuze will nonetheless argue, in his final published essay ‘Immanence: a life . . .’ that transcendental empiricism is to be contrasted with ‘everything that makes up the world of the subject and the object’ (PI 25). Furthermore, in Dialogues Deleuze counters the charge that his work (along with his work with Félix Guattari) is dualistic by arguing that one avoids dualism only ‘when you find between the terms . . . whether they are two or more, a narrow gorge like a border or a frontier which will turn the set into a multiplicity, independently of the number of parts’ (D 132). Between identifiable terms, therefore, is a multiplicity, and with this multiplicity Deleuze’s empiricism is remarkably similar to Hume’s. Hume, as will be argued in the chapters to follow, does not presuppose the simple, discontinuous identities of impressions and ideas as the already individuated givens with which the principles of association work. Identity, on our reading of Hume, is fictioned from within a multiplicity. Understood in this way, Deleuze’s Hume will be seen to be in line with the projects of James and Bergson, for Deleuze likewise
proposes a multiplicity – namely, a transcendental field of pre-individual singularities – that comes to be drawn (fictioned) into a plane of consistency (in what Deleuze will call a first articulation) that is then actualized as identifiable, individuated entities and terms (in a second articulation). Between the identifiable terms of a dualism or set, therefore, there is a multiplicity, the AND, and this, for Deleuze, is in the end what empiricism is ultimately all about: ‘Thinking with AND, instead of thinking IS, instead of thinking for IS: empiricism has never had another secret. Try it, it is a quite extraordinary thought, and yet it is life’ (D 57).

Thinking with AND, however, is not a thinking about or of life, nor is it a thinking for the sake of life, but it is life. And yet in making this claim the thinking with AND has been individuated and identified, the is has returned – ‘and yet it is life.’ In thinking the nature of Deleuze’s thought, in thinking what it is to be ‘thinking with AND, instead of thinking IS,’ this thinking itself becomes, as Deleuze affirms, immediately double. The return of the is is thus double, hence an empiricism that seeks to determine and think the real ‘conditions under which something new is produced,’ will not ‘be correctly defined except by means of dualism.’ This is no less true when it comes to the efforts of Deleuze’s commentators to think the nature of Deleuze’s thought. We have on the one hand what could be called the materialist or realist Deleuze. Here the thinking with AND that is life is a life that is a dynamic system that draws associative connections within a multiplicity of elements, associations that then come to be actualized as an emergent property that is irreducible to the multiplicity of elements themselves. Whether this is the reciprocal relations among phonemes Deleuze refers to as ‘a virtual system,’ a system that is then ‘incarnated in the actual terms and relations of diverse languages,’ (DR 208) or any of a number of other ways in which materiality involves dynamic processes of self-organization, what is generally assumed here is that Deleuze’s concepts enable us to comprehend and make sense of material processes that are nonetheless real and distinct from the conceptual activity that names and identifies them as the types of process they already were prior to being named.

In contrast to the realist or materialist Deleuze, there is the idealist, nominalist Deleuze. On this reading, life is an Idea or problem, meaning, as these terms are discussed in Difference and Repetition and elsewhere, that life as an Idea or problematic is only identifiable as actualized within an entity that is a solution to this problem. Eyes, Deleuze notes, are the actualized solution of a light problem, a problem that becomes identifiable as such only after it has become actualized as eyesight. Otherwise, the problematic (or virtual) does not yet exist as an identifiable state, and thus it is not an identifiable distinct state separate from the actual. The realist Deleuze thus provides us with the conceptual tools to name that which already is/was...
identifiable, and the nominalist Deleuze gives us the means to name the manner in which something is *not yet* identifiable but becomes so when it becomes nameable – that is, when actualized. We have, in short, the event of Deleuze’s thought, and as ‘event,’ as Deleuze defines it in *Logic of Sense*, ‘there is indeed the present moment of its actualization,’ but there is also, more importantly, ‘the future and past of the event considered in itself, side-stepping each present, being free of the limitations of a state of affairs, impersonal, pre-individual, neutral’ (LS 151).

These contrasting interpretations of Deleuze’s work do not pose a problem for Deleuze scholarship; to the contrary, they highlight Deleuze’s very claim that empiricism is only correctly defined by dualism. One need not choose between the realist or nominalist Deleuze. It is more accurate to state, instead, that there is a double movement of Deleuze’s thought, a nominalist and realist movement, and this double movement becomes, as actualized and individuated within the thought that seeks to determine the nature of Deleuze’s philosophy, two contrasting if not opposing interpretations. Moreover, a similar dualism is at work in Hume’s thought, for with Hume as well – as Deleuze points out – there is the dualism between the causes of perception on the one hand and the causes of relations on the other (see ES 109, and Chapter 1 below). This in turn leads to two contrasting readings. There is the realist Hume who sees hidden causal powers that are already there and function as the basis upon which the order and regularity of our sense impressions depends; and then there is the nominalist Hume who claims that causal powers arise only after the association of ideas and custom. These two interpretations comprise what has come to be called the New Hume debate, which will be discussed at length in Chapter 1.

In the following study we will resist the temptation to identify Deleuze’s philosophical approach as being either realist or nominalist. More to the point, we will pay heed to Deleuze’s advice and study Deleuze AND Hume, thereby attempting to avoid a dualistic interpretation by finding the ‘border’ or ‘frontier’ that will turn Deleuze AND Hume, along with Deleuze the realist AND Deleuze the nominalist, ‘into a multiplicity.’ What this will mean, and as the arguments of subsequent chapters will show, is that a multiplicity is always already identified the more the multiplicity comes to be named and identified. Put in other terms, there is no *already* distinct, autonomous reality that Deleuzian concepts enable us to understand and identify; nor do Deleuzian concepts simply enable us to facilitate the emergence of a novel reality that has *not yet* occurred; rather, a distinct, autonomous reality is distinct and autonomous precisely insofar as it facilitates the emergence of novel realities that have not yet occurred. As Bruno Latour states this same point in *Pandora’s Hope*, ‘it is because it [autonomous reality] is constructed that it is so very real, so autonomous,
so independent of our own hands’ (Latour 1999, 275). What this means for Latour, and for Deleuze on the reading offered here, is that between the identifiable terms of a dualism – cause and effect, subject and object, autonomous and constructed, already and not yet – there is a multiplicity of singularities that allows for the possibility of identifying a distinct, autonomous reality the more this multiplicity is drawn into a network of collaborative associations. Latour uses the concept ‘relative existence’ to refer to this process, meaning that ‘an entity . . . gains in reality if it is associated with many others that are viewed as collaborating with it. It loses in reality if, on the contrary, it has to shed associates or collaborators’ (Latour 2000, 257). We thus do not begin with being, with what already or not yet is, but with processes whereby what is acquires and loses relative being and existence, and does so as the singularities acquire greater or lesser connections with other singularities. This is the sense then in which one should read Deleuze and Guattari’s claim that ‘politics precedes being’ (TP 203) – being, in short, cannot be thought as such without presupposing the processes of association that raise and lower the relative existence of that which is. We will refer to the relationship between this process and being as historical ontology.

These themes will occupy us in the chapters to follow, but in order to indicate briefly the trajectory we will be pursuing we can return to Hume. Reading Hume in light of the concept of historical ontology, what this entails for Hume’s notion of belief is that the more lively the belief in something is, the more reality is attributed to that which is believed. Thus the belief in the continued existence of independent objects is not a belief that is justified by the independence and autonomy of the objects of this belief; rather, the justification of belief is ‘nothing but the vivacity of those perceptions they present’ (T 86). The more associations are established through custom, the more lively the belief, and hence the more justified and reasonable the belief. A consequence of this position, as Deleuze notes, is the inseparability of delusional beliefs from reasonable ones. There are, for Hume, no transcendent standards and limits that would enable us to differentiate between a lively idea that is reasonable and one that has become delusional; there are only immanent standards and limits, and thus the reasonableness of belief and the reality of that which is believed are differentiated precisely because of the immanent construction of these limits. And yet the excesses of delusion, the tendencies that may very well undermine and transform one’s reasonable beliefs into fits of madness, remain presupposed by these very beliefs. Similarly for Deleuze, the reality of the actual, its identifiable essence and nature, is actual precisely because of the reality of the virtual. This is not, as Badiou implies, because the reality of the virtual is a distinct reality that determines the actualization of the actual; to the contrary, the virtual is the
problematic in inseparable from the actualization of the actual, and by *inseparable* we mean simply that the reality of the actual is real because it can become problematized and become other AND still other actualities. This is the power of AND, the power of life, and the thinking of empiricism which ‘has never had another secret.’ It is no wonder, then, that Deleuze always considered himself an empiricist, and it is also no surprise that Hume’s project would provide an influential trajectory for Deleuze’s thought, a trajectory Deleuze would follow from his first to his final writings.

The following chapters will detail the implications of thinking Deleuze AND Hume, implications that will provide connections between Hume and Deleuze and a number of issues to be found in William James, Henri Bergson, and political philosophy. To this end, Chapter 1 will explore the problematic Deleuze believes to be at work in Hume’s philosophy, namely the problem of how a multiplicity of ideas and impressions in the mind comes to constitute a subject with beliefs that go ‘beyond what is immediately present to the senses.’ This problematic will become, in Deleuze’s hands, transcendental empiricism, or the effort to think the conditions for the production of the new that does not reduce the identity of the new to these conditions. To clarify the nature of Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism, we will then turn to address William James’ criticisms of Hume (sketched above). Chapter 2 will address the problem of personal identity in Hume’s philosophy, which will enable us to further elaborate our argument that for both Hume and Deleuze there is an historical ontology inseparable from each and every identity, including the identity of the self or person. With these arguments in place, we then show that Deleuze’s work on Bergson, undertaken soon after his work on Hume, is not – despite Bergson’s criticisms of Hume – a departure for Deleuze but is rather part of his continuing effort to develop a transcendental empiricism.

In Chapter 3 our focus will shift to history, and more precisely to a discussion of the relationship between creative, novel events and the already constituted historical conditions within which these events appear. Rather than providing a causal analysis of such events, a Deleuzian approach offers a counter-causal reading of history that does not seek to account for historical events by relating them to a preceding actuality that would function as a causal factor, but rather attempts to move from the actual to the virtual ‘unhistorical vapour’ (WP 140) that is inseparable from these actualities – a virtual that may very well, as was Deleuze’s strategy, problematize the actualities of the present. Chapters 4 and 5 will explore how the deterritorializing tendencies of creative events come to be captured, for better AND for worse. Along these lines, we will discuss the important role institutions play, for Hume, in producing both a love for humanity and the belief that becoming cultured and polished will benefit humanity. Chapter 5 will take the
Scottish Enlightenment as a case study to assist us in clarifying the arguments of the preceding chapters. The sixth and final chapter will explore the political implications of Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism, where it will be argued that there are indeed – despite the criticisms that claim Deleuze’s project has no effective connection with the political – important political ramifications in his thought. In short, we shall show that becoming-imperceptible is for Deleuze an effective tool in becoming-revolutionary, and, more precisely, in resisting the powers of the capitalist societies of control, powers we have largely come to believe in and desire. In the spirit of Deleuze, therefore, we shall seek to find between the terms of this study, between the proper names David Hume and Gilles Deleuze, a multiplicity that is irreducible to these terms, and a multiplicity that may problematize these AND many other terms besides. We shall seek to think Deleuze’s Hume.

Notes

1. In an interview with Antonio Negri, Deleuze claims that what first attracted him to the work of Hume was ‘a very creative conception of institutions and law’ (N 169).

2. Peter Hallward has also come down hard on Deleuze for being a dualistic philosopher, and even more for being a dualistic philosopher who stresses the virtual as nothing less than a movement or tendency out of this world, a freeing or escape from this world, over and against the actualities of this world. See Hallward 2006.

3. In his early essay on Bergson, Deleuze argued that ‘virtuality exists in such a way that it actualizes itself as it dissociates itself; it must dissociate itself to actualize itself’ (DI 40). And as this actualization unfolds, Deleuze adds a few pages later, ‘what is differentiating itself in two divergent tendencies is a virtuality’ (DI 42). The realist and nominalist Deleuze (to be discussed below) are thus the two divergent tendencies that arise as the event that is Deleuze’s thought is actualized by the commentaries that set forth this thought.

4. Brian Massumi, for instance, uses the language of chaos theory (e.g., strange attractors, self-organization, dissipative structures, etc.) to clarify Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy (see Massumi 1992). A similar approach can be found in DeLanda (1997, 2002), who interprets Deleuze and Guattari as exemplars of the theory of nonlinear dynamics. John Protevi and Mark Bonta have pushed this scientific reading of Deleuze and Guattari even more forcefully, arguing that just as Kant’s philosophy enabled us to make sense of a Euclidean world, so too Deleuze’s work ‘provides the philosophical concepts that make sense of our world of fragmented space (the fractals of Mandelbrot, the “patchworks” of Riemann), twisted time (the so-called anticipatory effects of systems that sense their approach to a threshold), and the non-linear effects of far-from-equilibrium thermodynamics’ (Protevi and Bonta 2004, viii).

5. DR 211: ‘An organism is nothing if not the solution to a problem, as are each of its differenciated organs, such as the eye which solves a light “problem.”’
6. Dan Smith has stated this position most forcefully and persuasively in a series of articles, most recently in his essay ‘The Conditions of the New’ (Smith 2007). In showing how Deleuze extends Maimon’s critique of Kant, Smith argues that the concept of the differential (as found in the calculus) enables Deleuze to think the conditions of real experience. More precisely, the differential is the unconditioned that enables the determination of a relation between a condition and the conditioned. As Smith puts it, the ‘conditions of real experience must be determined at the same time as what they are conditioning’ (13), and the differential, or the Idea as problem as Smith shows, is the unconditioned element or groundless ground for every determinate condition–conditioned relationship, but it is only identifiable ‘at the same time as what they are conditioning.’ It is only in this way that Deleuze can account for the new, for a conditioned that is not pre-determined by a condition that already contains it (as a possibility). This is in contrast, therefore, to the realist Deleuze, whereby Deleuzian concepts facilitate a better understanding and representation of what is already there. It should be noted, however, that Smith acknowledges the double movement in Deleuze’s work, or what we have called the nominalist and realist movements, when citing the following passage from Deleuze: ‘Sufficient reason or the ground . . . is strangely bent: on the one hand, it leans towards what it grounds, towards the forms of representation [realist direction]; on the other hand, it turns and plunges into a groundlessness beyond the ground which resists all forms and cannot be represented [nominalist direction]’ (DR 274–5; cited by Smith, 7).

7. When this point is made Deleuze and Guattari are discussing the Body Without Organs (BwO) and the lines that are drawn upon this body. As will be discussed in the chapters to follow, the BwO is the multiplicity which is drawn into relations that then come to be actualized as identifiable, determinate beings, beliefs, etc.

8. Ian Hacking has recently written of historical ontology in a book of the same name (Hacking 2002). As Hacking uses the term, he is referring to the historicity of ways in which a subject can be. He gives the example of trauma to show that there is a history to the different ways in which a subject can be, such as a subject suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). We shall extend this concept and argue that Deleuze’s Humean project calls for an historical ontology inseparable from each and every identifiable being.

9. See ES 83, for instance, where Deleuze comes to the following conclusion after discussing the importance of the fictioning of identity and unity for Hume: ‘From the point of view of philosophy, the mind is no longer anything but delirium and madness. There is no complete system, synthesis, or cosmology that is not imaginary.’

10. In Deleuze: The Clamour of Being, Badiou is quite forthright in his criticism, arguing that ‘the virtual [for Deleuze] is no better than the finality of which it is the inversion (it determines the destiny of everything, instead of being that to which everything is destined)’ (Badiou 2000, 53).

11. We could also say this is the power of becoming. As Heraclitus notes in his famous fragment: ‘As they step into the same rivers, different and <still> different waters flow upon them’ (Fragment 12 in Heraclitus 1987, 17). It is important to note the ‘and’ in ‘different and <still> different waters.’ A multiplicity of ‘different and <still> different waters’ is presupposed by the identity and being of ‘same rivers.’