
DELEUZE AND THE QUESTION OF DESIRE: TOWARD AN IMMANENT THEORY OF ETHICS¹

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The title of this paper raises two questions, each of which I would like to address in turn. The first question is: What exactly is an immanent ethics (as opposed to an ethics that appeal to transcendence)? The second question is: What is the philosophical question of desire? My ultimate question concerns the link between these two issues: What relation does an immanent ethics have to the question of desire? Historically, the first question is primarily linked with the names of Spinoza and Nietzsche (as well as, as we shall see, Leibniz), since it was Spinoza and Nietzsche who posed the question of an immanent ethics in its most rigorous form. The second question is linked to names like Freud and Lacan, and behind them, to Kant, since it was they who formulated the modern conceptualization of desire in its most acute form—that is, in terms of unconscious desire, desire as unconscious. It was in *Anti-Oedipus*, published in 1972, that Deleuze (along with Félix Guattari, his co-author) would attempt to formulate his own theory of desire—what he would call a purely immanent theory of desire. In his preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, Michel Foucault would claim, famously, that “*Anti-Oedipus* is a book of ethics, the first book of ethics to be written in France in quite a long time”—thereby making explicit the link between the theory of desire developed in *Anti-Oedipus* with the immanent theory of ethics Deleuze worked out in his monographs on Nietzsche and Spinoza.²

The paper falls into three parts. In the first, I want to make some general comments about the nature of an immanent ethics. In the second part, I would like to examine in some detail two sets of texts from Nietzsche and Leibniz, which will flesh out some of the details of an immanent ethics. And I’ll conclude with some all-too-brief comments on the nature of desire and some of the themes of *Anti-Oedipus*.

1. ON THE NATURE OF AN IMMANENT ETHICS

Let’s turn to the first question, then: What is an immanent ethics? Throughout his writings, Deleuze has often drawn a distinction between “ethics” and “morality”—a distinction that has traditionally been drawn to distinguish modes of reflection that place greater emphasis, respectively, on the good life (such as Stoicism) or on the moral law (such as Kantianism). Deleuze, however, uses the term “morality” to define, in very general terms, any set of “constraining” rules, such as a moral code, that consists in judging actions and intentions by relating them to transcendent or universal values

(“This is Good, that is Evil”).³ What he calls “ethics” is, on the contrary, a set of “facilitative” [*facultative*] rules that evaluates what we do, say, and think according to the immanent mode of existence that it implies. One says or does this, thinks or feels that: what mode of existence does it imply? “We always have the beliefs, feelings, and thoughts we deserve,” writes Deleuze, “given our way of being or our style of life.”⁴

Now according to Deleuze, this immanent approach to the question of ethics was developed most fully, in the history of philosophy, by Spinoza and Nietzsche, whom Deleuze has often identified as his own philosophical precursors.⁵ Both Spinoza and Nietzsche—perhaps not surprisingly—were both maligned by their contemporaries not simply for being atheists, but even worse, for being “immoralists.”⁶ A potent danger, in other words, was immediately seen to be lurking in Spinoza’s *Ethics* and Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*: without transcendence, without recourse to normative universals, we will all fall into the dark night of chaos, and ethics will be reduced to a pure “subjectivism” or “relativism.” Both Spinoza and Nietzsche argued, each in his own way, that there are things one cannot do or think except on the condition of being weak, base, or enslaved, unless one harbors a vengeance or resentment against life (Nietzsche), unless one remains the slave of passive affections (Spinoza); and there are other things one cannot do or say except on the condition of being strong, noble, or free, unless one affirms life, unless one attains active affections.⁶ Deleuze calls this the method of “dramatization”: actions and propositions are interpreted as so many sets of symptoms that express or “dramatize” the mode of existence of the speaker. “What is the mode of existence of the person who utters a given proposition?” asks Nietzsche, “What mode of existence is needed in order to be able to utter it?”⁷ Rather than “judging” actions and thoughts by appealing to transcendent or universal values, one “evaluates” them by determining the mode of existence that serves as their principle. A pluralistic method of explanation by immanent modes of existence is in this way made to replace the recourse to transcendent values: in Spinoza and Nietzsche, the transcendent moral opposition (between Good and Evil) is replaced an immanent ethical difference (between noble and base modes of existence, in Nietzsche; or between passive and active affections, in Spinoza).

In Spinoza, for instance, an individual will be considered “bad” (or servile, or weak, or foolish) who remains cut off from its power of acting, who remains in a state of slavery with regard to its passions. Conversely, a mode of existence will be considered to be “good” (or free, or rational, or strong) that exercises its capacity for being affected in such a way that its power of acting increases, to the point where it produces active affections and adequate ideas. For Deleuze, this is the point of convergence that unites Nietzsche and Spinoza in their search for an immanent ethics. Modes are no longer “judged” in terms of their degree of proximity to or distance from an external principle, but are “evaluated” in terms of the manner by which they “occupy” their existence: the intensity of their power, their “tenor” of life.⁸ It is always a question of knowing whether a mode of existence—however great or small it may be—is capable of deploying its capacities, of increasing its power of acting to the point where it can be said to go to the limit of what it “can do.”⁹ The fundamental question of ethics is not “What must I do?” (which is the question of morality) but rather “What can I do, what am I capable of doing (which is the proper question of an ethics without morality). Given my degree of power, what are my capabilities and capacities? How can I come into active possession of my power? How can I go to the limit of what I “can do”?

What an ethics of immanence will criticize, then, is anything that separates a mode of existence from its power of acting—and what separates us from our power of acting are, ultimately, the illusions of transcendence. (We should immediately point out that the illusions of transcendence go far beyond the transcendence of God; in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had already critiqued the concepts of the Self, the World, and God as the three great illusions of transcendence; and what he calls the “moral law” in the second critique is, by Kant’s own admission, a transcendent law.) When Spinoza and Nietzsche criticize transcendence, their interest is not merely theoretical or speculative—exposing its fictional or illusory status—but rather practical and ethical.¹⁰ This is no doubt the point that separates Deleuze most from the ethical thinking of Emmanuel Levinas—the great philosopher of transcendence, insofar as the Other is the paradigmatic concept of transcendence—as well as Jacques Derrida, who was much closer to Levinas than Deleuze on these matters. The ethical themes one finds in transcendent philosophies like those of Levinas and Derrida—an absolute responsibility for the other that I can never assume, or an infinite call to justice that I can never satisfy—would be, from the Deleuzian point of view of immanence, akin to imperatives whose effect is to separate me from my capacity to act. From the viewpoint of immanence, in other words, transcendence, far from being our salvation, represents our slavery and impotence reduced to its lowest point: the demand to do the impossible (a frequent Derridean theme) is nothing other than the concept of impotence raised to infinity.

But this is precisely why the question of desire is linked with the theme of an immanent ethics, and becomes a political question. For one of the most difficult problems posed by an immanent ethics is the following: if transcendence represents my impotence (at the limit, my power reduced to zero), then under what conditions can I have actually been led to desire transcendence? What are the conditions that could have led, in Nietzsche’s words, to “the inversion of the value-positing eye”—that is, to the whole history of nihilism that Nietzsche analyses (and nihilism, for Nietzsche, is nothing other than the triumph of transcendence, the point where life itself is given a value of nil, nihil)? This is the fundamental political problem posed by an immanent ethics: How can people reach a point where they actually desire their servitude and slavery as if it were their salvation—for those in power have an obvious interest in separating us from our capacity to act? How, in other words, can we desire to be separated from power, from our capacity to act? As Deleuze writes, following Reich: “The astonishing thing is not that some people steal or that others occasionally go out on strike, but rather that all those who are starving do not steal as a regular practice, and all those who are exploited are not continually out on strike” (AO 29). In other words, whereas other moral theories see transcendence as a necessary principle—the transcendence of the moral law in Kant, for instance, or the transcendence of the Other in Levinas—for Deleuze transcendence is the fundamental problem of ethics, what prevents ethics from taking place, so to speak.

So we’ve developed two aspects of an immanent ethics: it focuses on the differences between modes of existence, in terms of their immanent capabilities or power (active versus reactive, in Nietzsche; active versus passive, in Spinoza), and it poses, as one of its fundamental problems, the urge toward transcendence that effectively “perverts” desire, to the point where we can actually desire our own repression, a separation from our own capacities and powers.

2. NIETZSCHE AND LEIBNIZ: THE THEORY OF THE DRIVES

With these two aspects in mind, let me turn to the second—and largest—part of my paper, which deals with the question of how Deleuze in fact characterizes modes of existence, with their powers and capacities. The answer is this: Deleuze approaches modes of existence, ethically speaking, not in terms of their will, or their conscious decision making power (as in Kant), nor in terms of their interests (as in Marx, for example), but rather in terms of their drives. For Deleuze, conscious will and preconscious interest are both subsequent to our unconscious drives, and it is at the level of the drives that we have to aim our ethical analysis. Here, I would like to focus on two sets of texts on the drives taken, not from Nietzsche and Spinoza, but rather from Nietzsche and Leibniz (Leibniz being one of the first philosophers in the history of philosophy to have developed a theory of the unconscious).

The first set of texts comes from Nietzsche's great early book entitled *Daybreak*, published in July 1881. Nietzsche first approaches the question of the drives by giving us an everyday scenario: "Suppose we were in the market place one day," he writes, "and we noticed someone laughing at us as we went by: this event will signify this or that to us according to whether this or that drive happens at that moment to be at its height in us—and it will be a quite different event according to the kind of person we are. One person will absorb it like a drop of rain, another will shake it from him like an insect, another will try to pick a quarrel, another will examine his clothing to see if there is anything about it that might give rise to laughter, another will be led to reflect on the nature of laughter as such, another will be glad to have involuntarily augmented the amount of cheerfulness and sunshine in the world—and in each case, a drive has gratified itself, whether it be the drive to annoyance, or to combativeness or to reflection or to benevolence. This drive seized the event as its prey. Why precisely this one? Because, thirsty and hungry, it was lying in wait" (D 119).

This is the source of Nietzsche's doctrine of perspectivism ("there are no facts, only interpretations"), but what is often overlooked is that, for Nietzsche, it is our drives that interpret the world, that are perspectival—and not our egos, not our conscious opinions. It is not so much that I have a different perspective on the world than you; it is rather that each of us has multiple perspectives on the world because of the multiplicity of our drives—drives that are often contradictory among themselves. "Within ourselves," Nietzsche writes, "we can be egoistic or altruistic, hard-hearted, magnanimous, just, lenient, insincere, can cause pain or give pleasure" (Parkes, pp. 291-292). We all contain such "a vast confusion of contradictory drives" (WP 259) that we are, as Nietzsche liked to say, multiplicities, and not unities. Moreover, these drives are in a constant struggle or combat with each other: my drive to smoke and get my nicotine rush is in combat with (but also coexistent with) my drive to quit. This is where Nietzsche first developed his concept of the will to power—at the level of the drives. "Every drive is a kind of lust to rule," he writes, "each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm" (WP 481).

To be sure, we can combat the drives, fight against them—indeed, this is one of the most common themes in philosophy, the fight against the passions. In another passage from *Daybreak* (109), Nietzsche says that he can see only six fundamental methods we have at our disposal for combating the drives. For instance: if we want to fight our drive to smoke, we can avoid opportunities for its gratification (no longer hiding packs of cigarettes at home for when we run out), or we can implant regularity into the drive (having one cigarette every four hours so as to at least avoid

smoking in between), or we can engender disgust with the drive, giving ourselves over to its wild and unrestrained gratification (say, smoking non-stop for a month) to the point where we become disgusted with it. And so on. But then Nietzsche asks: Who exactly is combating the drives in these various ways? His answer (given in a second aphorism taken from *Daybreak*) is this: The fact “that one desires to combat the vehemence of a drive at all, however, does not stand within our own power; nor does the choice of any particular method; nor does the success or failure of this method. What is clearly the case is that in this entire procedure our intellect is only the blind instrument of another drive which is a rival of the drive whose vehemence is tormenting us....While ‘we’ believe we are complaining about the vehemence of a drive, at bottom it is one drive which is complaining about the other; that is to say: for us to become aware that we are suffering from the vehemence [or violence] of a drive presupposes the existence of another equally vehement or even more vehement drive, and that a struggle is in prospect in which our intellect is going to have to take sides” (*Daybreak* 109). What we call thinking, willing, and feeling are all “merely a relation of these drives to each other” (BGE 36).

Thus, what do I mean when I say “I am trying to stop smoking”—even though that same I is constantly going ahead and continuing to smoke? It simply means that my conscious intellect is taking sides and associating itself with a particular drive. It would make just as much sense to say, “Occasionally I feel this strange urge to stop smoking, but happily I have managed to combat that drive and pick up a cigarette whenever I want.” Almost automatically, Nietzsche says, we take our predominant drive and for the moment turn it into the whole ego, placing all our weaker drives perspectively farther away, as if those other drives weren’t me but rather an it (hence Freud’s idea of the “id,” the “it”—it is clear he got this idea from Nietzsche). When we talk about the “I,” we are simply indicating which drive, at the moment, is sovereign, strongest; “the feeling of the I is always strongest where the preponderance [*Übergewicht*] is,” flickering from drive to drive. But the drives themselves remain largely unknown to what we sometimes call the conscious intellect. In a third aphorism from *Daybreak*, Nietzsche concludes, “However far a man may go in self-knowledge, nothing however can be more incomplete than his image of the totality of drives which constitute his being. He can scarcely name the cruder ones: their number and strength, their ebb and flood, their play and counterplay among one another—and above all the laws of their nutriment—remain unknown to him” (D 119). In other words, there is no struggle of reason against the drives; what we call “reason” is itself nothing more than a certain “system of relations between various passions” (WP 387), a certain ordering of the drives.

This, however, is where the question of morality comes in for Nietzsche, for one of the primary functions of morality is to establish an “order of rank” among the drives or impulses: “Wherever we encounter a morality,” Nietzsche writes, “we also encounter valuations and an order of rank of human impulses” (GS 116). “Now one and now another human impulse and state held first place and was ennobled because it was esteemed so highly” (GS 115). Consider any list of impulses—in our present morality, industriousness is ranked higher than sloth; obedience higher than defiance; chastity higher than promiscuity, and so on. One can easily imagine—and indeed find—other moralities that make a different selection of the drives, giving prominence, for instance, to impulses such as aggressiveness and ferocity (a warrior culture). When Nietzsche inquires into the genealogy of morality, he is inquiring into the conditions of any particular moral ranking of the impulses: why certain impulses are selected for and certain impulses are selected against. And we know that Nietzsche argued that the value inherent in most contemporary moral rankings is the value of what

he calls the “herd instinct,” that is, the impulses that are selected for are those that serve the instincts of the community, the furtherance of the “species” (hence that persistent question addressed to children, “What if everyone did what you are now doing?”). But behind this claim is the fundamental insight that there is no distinction between nature and artifice at the level of the drives: it is not as if we could simply remove the mechanisms of morality and allow the drives to exist in a “free” and “unbound” state: there is no such thing, except as an Idea. Kant liked to say that we can never get beyond our representations of the world; Nietzsche surmises that what we can never get beyond is in fact the reality of the drives (BGE 36). In fact, the drives and impulses are always assembled or arranged, from the start, in different ways, in different individuals, in different cultures, in different eras—which is why Nietzsche always insisted that there are a plurality of moralities (and what he found lacking in his time was an adequate comparative study of moralities.)

Now in *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari, it seems to me, takes up this Nietzschean schema, *mutatis mutandis*. What he calls “desire” is nothing other than the state of the impulses and drives. “Drives,” he writes in *Anti-Oedipus*, are simply the desiring-machines themselves” (AO 35). Moreover, like Nietzsche, Deleuze insists that the drives never exist in a free and unbound state, nor are they ever merely individual; they are always arranged and assembled by the social formation in which we find ourselves, and one of the aims of *Anti-Oedipus* is to construct a typology of social formations—primitive territorial societies, States, capitalism, and, later, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, nomadic war machines—each of which organizes and assembles the drives and impulses in different ways. Behind this claim, it seems to me, there lies an attempt to resolve an old debate that concerned the relationship between Marx and Freud. Like Nietzsche, both Marx and Freud each insisted, in their own way, that our conscious thought is determined by forces and drives that go far beyond consciousness, forces that are, as we say “unconscious” (though we are far too used to this word; it might be better to formulate a new one). Put crudely, in Marx, our thought is determined by our class (“class consciousness”); in Freud, we are determined by our unconscious desires (stemming, usually, from familial conflicts). The nature of the relationship between these two unconsciousnesses—the “political economy” of Marx and the “libidinal” economy of Freud—was a problem that numerous thinkers tried to deal with in the twentieth-century (Marcuse, Brown, Reich, and others). For a long time, the relation between the two was usually formulated in terms of the mechanism of “introjection” and “projection”: as an individual, I introject the interests of my class, my culture, my social milieu, which eventually come to determine my consciousness (my “false” consciousness); at the same time, the political economy was seen as a projection of the individual desires of the population that produced it. Deleuze and Guattari famously reject these mechanisms in *Anti-Oedipus*: they argue that political economy (Marx), on the one hand, and libidinal economy (Freud), on the other, are one and the same thing. “The only means of bypassing the sterile parallelism where we flounder between Freud and Marx,” Deleuze and Guattari write, is “by discovering...how the affects or drives form part of the infrastructure itself” (AO 63). This is an extraordinary claim: your very drives and impulses, even the unconscious ones, which seems to be what is most individual about you, are themselves economic, they are already part of what Marx called the infrastructure.

Now with these Nietzschean reflections in hand, I want to turn to my second text of an immanent ethics, which comes from Leibniz’s *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*.¹¹ Although the names of Nietzsche and Leibniz are not usually linked together by philosophers, the relation between the two thinkers is not an accidental one. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche praised Leibniz’s critique of

consciousness and his differential conception of the unconscious, the profundity of which he says, “has not been exhausted to this day” (GS 357). In the *New Essays*, Leibniz asks: What would it mean to act “freely,” as we like to say, given this theory of the drives? Leibniz asks us to consider a simple example: suppose I am hesitating between staying at home and writing this paper, or going out to a tavern to have a drink with some friends. (The same analysis would apply to the hesitation someone might feel, say, for choosing between two candidates in an election.) How do I go about making a decision between these two? The error would be to objectify these two options, as if “staying in” or “going out” were objects that could be weighed in a balance, and as if deliberation were an act of judgment in which “I”—my self, my ego, my intellect—attempt to assess the direction toward which the balance is leaning, “all thing being equal.” But in fact these two options are not isolatable “objects” but rather two drives, or as Leibniz calls them, “motives” or “inclinations” of the soul. The strength of Leibniz’s analysis in the *New Essays* is to show that drives or motives are not simple things, but rather complex “orientations” or “tendencies,” each of which integrates within themselves a host of what he liked to call “minute perceptions.” My inclination to go to the tavern, for instance, includes not only the minute perception of the effect of the alcohol, or the taste and temperature of the drink, but also the clinking of glasses in the bar, the smoke in the air, the conversation with friends, the temporary lifting of one’s solitude, and so on. The same is true of the inclination to stay at home and work, which includes the minute perceptions of the rustling of paper, the noise of my fingers tapping at the computer, the quality of the silence of the room when I stop tapping, the comfort (or frustration) that I find in my work. Both inclinations are formed within an unconscious complex of auditive, gustative, olfactory, and visual perceptions, an entire perceptio-inclinatorily ensemble. For just as we have unconscious perceptions, we likewise are constituted by what Leibniz called “insensible inclinations” or “disquietudes” of which we are not aware, that pull us simultaneously in a multitude of directions.¹² Not only are all of us constituted by a multitude of unconscious drives, each drive is itself multiple, an infinite complex of minute perceptions and inclinations. It is these drives and motives that constitute the very tissue of the soul, constantly folding it in all directions. This is what Locke termed the “uneasiness” of the soul, its state of constant disquiet and disequilibrium, and Leibniz, its dark background, the *fuscum subnigrum*.

What then is the act of deliberation? At the moment when I am torn between staying home and going out for a drink, the tissue of my soul is in a state of disequilibrium—oscillating between two complex perceptive poles (the perceptive pole of the tavern and the perceptive pole of the study), each of which is itself swarming with an infinity of minute perceptions and inclinations.. Here, the movement of the soul, as Leibniz says, more properly resembles a pendulum rather than a balance—and often a rather wildly swinging balance at that.¹³ The question of decision is: On which side will I “fold” my soul? With which minute inclinations and perceptions will I make a “decisive” fold? Arriving at a decision is a matter of “integrating” (to use a mathematical term) the minute perceptions and inclinations in a “distinguished” perception or a “remarkable” inclination.

The error of the usual schema of judgment is that, in objectifying my two options—staying home or going out—as if they were weights in a balance, it presumes that they remain the same in front of me, and that the deliberating self likewise remains the same, simply assessing the two options in terms of some sort of decision procedure (whether in terms of my interest, or a calculus of probabilities, or an assessment of potential consequences). But this falsifies the nature of deliberation: if neither the options nor the self ever change, how could I ever arrive at a decision? The truth of the matter is that, during the entire time the deliberation is going on, the self is constantly changing, and

consequently is modifying the two feelings that are agitating it. What Leibniz (and Bergson, for that matter) calls a “free” act will be an act that effectuates the amplitude of my soul at a certain moment, the moment the act is undertaken. It is an act that integrates the small perceptions and small inclinations into a remarkable inclination, which then becomes an inclination of the soul. But this integration requires time: there is a psychic integration and a psychic time of integration. Thus, at 10:15 p.m. I have a vague urge to go to the tavern. Why do I not go? Because at that moment, it remains in the state of a minute inclination, a small perception, a swarm. The motivation is there, but if I still remain at home, working, I do not know the amplitude of my soul. Indeed, most of the time my actions do not correspond to the amplitude of my soul. “There is no reason,” says Deleuze, “to subject all the actions we undertake to the criterion: Is it free or not? Freedom is only for certain acts. There are all sorts of acts that do not have to be confronted with the problems of freedom. They are done solely, one could say, to calm our disquietude: all our habitual and machinal acts. We will speak of freedom only when we pose the question of an act capable or not of filling the amplitude of the soul at a given moment.”¹⁴

At 10:30 p.m., I finally say to myself, to hell with this paper, I’m going out drinking. Is that because the drive to go out has won out over the drive to stay home working? Even that simplifies the operation, since what came into play may have been other motives that remain largely unknown to us, such as (these are all examples given by Nietzsche in *Daybreak*): “the way we habitually expend our energy”; “or our indolence, which prefers to do what is easiest”; “or an excitation of our imagination brought about at the decisive moment by some immediate, very trivial event; or “quite incalculable physical influences”; or “some emotion or other [that] happens quite by chance to leap forth.”¹⁵ As Bergson puts it, in terms very similar to Leibniz’s, “all the time that the deliberation is going on, the self is changing and is consequently modifying the [often unknown] feelings that agitate it. A dynamic series of states is thus formed which permeate and strengthen one another, and which will lead by a natural evolution to a free act....In reality there are not two tendencies, or even two directions, but a self which lives and develops by means of its very hesitations, until the free action drops from it like an over-ripe fruit.”¹⁶ As Leibniz puts it, to say that we are “free” means that we are “inclined without being necessitated.” A free act is simply an act that expresses the whole of the soul at a given moment of duration—that is, an act that fills the amplitude of the soul at a given moment.

Parenthetically, one might contrast this theory of decision with the one proposed by Derrida in his well-known essay “Force of Law.” Both Derrida and Deleuze insist that decision presupposes an Idea, almost in the Kantian sense. For Derrida, however, these Ideas—for instance, the Idea of justice, which would guide our juridical decisions—are, as he says, “infinitely transcendent,” and hence the very condition of possibility of their effectuation is their impossibility. For Deleuze, such Ideas are purely immanent: the Idea is nothing other than the problematic multiplicity of these drives and minute inclinations, which constitutes the condition of any decision. In this sense, one might say that Deleuze “replaces the power of judgment with the force of decision.”¹⁷

3. THE THEORY OF DESIRE

Now with these two analyses in hand—Nietzsche’s theory of the drives (as a way of approaching the nature of modes of existence) and Leibniz’s theory of “freedom” (if we can still use this word) in relation to the theory of the drives—we can now turn to the question of desire, and the problem of how desire can desire its own repression. (What Deleuze ultimately means by the term “desire,”

of course, is different from the usual usage: it does not refer to my conscious desires—to get rich, to get laid, to get a job—but rather to the state of the unconscious drives.) There are quite a few consequences that follow from these analyses, but let me simply list five of them.

First, there is a school of economics that sees human as rational agents who always act in such a way as to maximize their own interests (what is sometimes called “rational choice theory”). Deleuze’s distinction between desire and interest seeks to put that claim in its proper context. Someone may have an interest, say, in becoming an academic, so he or she applies to the university, takes courses, writes an thesis, attends conferences, goes on the job market in hopes of securing a job, finding an academic position. You may indeed have an interest in all that, which you can pursue in a highly rational manner. But that interest exists as a possibility only within the context of a particular social formation, our capitalist formation. If you are capable of pursuing that interest in a concerted and rational manner, it is first of all because your desire—your drives and impulses—are themselves invested in the social formation that makes that interest possible. Your drives have been constructed, assembled, and arranged in such a manner that your desire is positively invested in the system that allows you to have this particular interest. This is why Deleuze can say that desire as such is always positive. Normally, we tend to think of desire in terms of lack: if we desire something, it is because we lack it. But Deleuze reconfigures the concept of desire: what we desire, what we invest our desire in, is a social formation, and in this sense desire is always positive. Lack appears only at the level of interest, because the social formation—the infrastructure—in which we have already invested our desire has in turn produced that lack. The result of this analysis is that we can now determine the proper object of a purely immanent ethics, which is neither my conscious will, or my conscious decisions, but neither is it my pre-conscious interests (say, my class interest, in the Marxist sense). The true object of an immanent ethics is the drives, and thus it entails, as both Spinoza and Nietzsche know, an entire theory of affectivity at the basis of any theory of ethics.

The second consequence follows from the first. The primacy of the question of desire over both interest and will is the reason Deleuze says that the fundamental problem of political philosophy is one that was formulated most clearly by Spinoza: “Why do people fight for their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?” (AO 29). In other words, why do we have such a stake in investing in a social system that constantly represses us, thwarts our interests, and introduces lack into our lives? In the end, the answer is simple: it is because your desire—that is, your drives and affects—are not your own, so to speak. They are, if I can put it this way, part of the capitalist infrastructure; they are not simply your own individual mental or psychic reality (AO 30). Nothing makes this more obvious than the effects of marketing, which are directed entirely at the manipulation of the drives and affects: at the drug store, I almost automatically reach for one brand of toothpaste rather than another, since I have a fervent interest in having my teeth cavity-free and whiter than white, and my breath fresher than fresh—but this is because my desire is already invested in the social formation that creates that interest, and that creates the sense of lack I feel if my teeth aren’t whiter than white, or my breath fresher than fresh.

Third, the difference between interest and desire could be said to parallel the difference between the rational and the irrational. “Once interests have been defined within the confines of a society, the rational is the way in which people pursue those interest and attempt to realize them” (DI 262-263)—the interest for a job, or cavity-free teeth. “But underneath that,” Deleuze insists, “you find desires, investments of desire that are not to be confused with investments of interest, and on which interests depend for their determination and very distribution: an enormous flow,

all kinds of libidinal-unconscious flows that constitute the delirium of this society” (DI 263). As Deleuze will say, “Reason is always a region carved out of the irrational—it is not sheltered from the irrational at all, but traversed by it and only defined by a particular kind of relationship among irrational factors. Underneath all reason lies delirium and drift. Everything about capitalism is rational, except capital...A stock market is a perfectly rational mechanism, you can understand it, learn how it works; capitalists know how to use it; and yet what a delirium, it’s mad...It’s just like theology: everything about it is quite rational—if you accept sin, the immaculate conception, and the incarnation, which are themselves irrational elements.”¹⁸

Fourth, how does Deleuze conceptualize this movement of desire? Interestingly, *Anti-Oedipus* can be read as an explicit attempt to rework the fundamental theses of Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*. Kant presents the second critique as a theory of desire, and he defines desire, somewhat surprisingly, in causal terms: desire is “a faculty which by means of its representations is the cause of the actuality of the objects of those representations.” In its lower form, the products of desire are fantasies and superstitions; but in its higher form (the will), the products of desire are acts of freedom under the moral law—actions which are, however, irreducible to mechanistic causality. Deleuze takes up Kant’s model of desire, but modifies it in two fundamental ways. First, if desire is productive or causal, then its product is itself real (and not illusory or noumenal): the entire socio-political field, Deleuze argues, must be seen as the historically determined product of desire. Second, to maintain this claim, Deleuze formulates an entirely new theory of “Ideas.” In Kant, the postulates of practical reason are found in the transcendent Ideas of God, World, and the Soul, which are themselves derived from the types of judgment of relation (categorical, hypothetical, disjunctive). In response, Deleuze, in the first chapters of *Anti-Oedipus*, formulates a purely immanent theory of Ideas, in which desire is constituted by a set of constituting passive syntheses (connective, disjunctive, conjunctive).

Now, I might now, in passing (developing this point would take us too far afield) that Deleuze develops his theory of desire in *Anti-Oedipus* partly in relation to Lacan, but by taking Lacan’s thought in a direction that most Lacanians would never go, and indeed they would insist that one cannot go there. *Anti-Oedipus*, as its subtitle (“Capitalism and Schizophrenia”) indicates, takes psychosis as its model for the unconscious. Lacan himself had said that the unconscious appears in its purest form in psychosis, but that in effect the unconscious remains inaccessible in psychotics, precisely because psychotics refuse symbolization. Thus, the dimension of the Real can only appear as a kind of negative moment in Lacan, as a kind of “gap” or “rupture” in the field of immanence (thereby reintroducing an element of transcendence). Deleuze, in this respect, effectively inverts Lacan, and presents *Anti-Oedipus* in its entirety as a theory of the Real that is described in all its positivity—that is, as a sub-representative field defined by differential partial objects or intensities that enter into indirect syntheses; pure positive multiplicities where everything is possible (transverse connections, polyvocal conjunctions, included disjunctions); signs of desire that compose a signifying chain, but which are themselves non-signifying, and so on (AO 309). It is an analysis of delirium, showing that—following the principles we have just outlined—the delirium that lies at the heart of the self (schizophrenia) is one and the same thing as the delirium that exists at the heart of our society (and appears most clearly in capitalism—a monetary mass that “exists” nowhere, and is controlled by no one, and is literally delirious in its operations. But talking about capitalism and schizophrenia is simply another way of saying that our drives and social through and through, that they are part of the infrastructure.

Fifth and finally, this is one way of suggesting that the concept of freedom—which plays such a decisive role in Kant’s philosophy—also assumes a prominent place in Deleuze’s own philosophy of desire, albeit in a new form—namely, as the question of the conditions for the production of the new. But as Deleuze frequently says, following thinkers like Salomon Maimon, what needed to happen in post-Kantian philosophy was a substitution of a viewpoint of internal genesis for the Kantian viewpoint of external condition. But “doing this,” Deleuze would explain, “means returning to Leibniz, but on bases other than Leibniz’s. All the elements to create a genesis such as the post-Kantians demand it, all the elements are virtually in Leibniz.”¹⁹ This is what one finds in Deleuze’s post-Kantian (Nietzschean) reading of Leibniz: the idea that the “I think” of consciousness bathes in an unconscious, an unconscious of drives, motives, and inclinations, which contain the differentials of what appears in consciousness, and which would therefore perform the genesis of the conditioned as a function of the condition. In this sense, Deleuze’s ethical philosophy might at first sight appear to be the exact opposite of Kant’s ethical theory, with the latter’s appeal to the transcendence of the Moral Law. Yet Kant himself insisted on a principle of immanence throughout his philosophy, even if he betrayed it in his books on practical philosophy. This is perhaps why, in Deleuze, the content of an immanent ethics is taken from Nietzsche and Spinoza, but its immanent form winds up being taken primarily from Kant. In this sense, one could say that Deleuze work, with regard to practical and political philosophy, in the end is at once an inversion as well as a completion of Kant’s critical philosophy.

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- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented as a talk in the “Ethics and Recent Critical Theory” lecture series at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in November 2005. I would like to thank Gregory Flaxman for inviting me to speak.
- 2 Michel Foucault, “Preface” to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* I, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking, 1977), p. xiii.
- 3 See Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 4, Nihilism, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), section 12, “Nietzsche’s ‘Moral’ Interpretation of Metaphysics”: “By ‘morality,’ Nietzsche usually understands a system of evaluations in which a transcendent world is posited as an idealized standard of measure” (pp. 76-77).
- 4 *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 1. On the distinction between ethics and morality, see *Negotiations*, pp. 100-101, 113-114. *Règles facultatives* is a term Deleuze adopts from the sociolinguist William Labov to designate “functions of internal variation and no longer constants”; see *Foucault*, pp. 146-147, note 18.
- 5 *Negotiations*, p. 135 (translation modified): “Everything tended toward the great Spinoza-Nietzsche identity.” Deleuze devoted a full-length monograph and a shorter introductory volume to both of these thinkers: *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962) and *Nietzsche* (1965); *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (1968) and *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (1970; revised and expanded edition, 1981).
- 6 At best, the Spinozistic and Nietzschean critiques were accepted as negative moments, exemplary instances of what must be fought against and rejected in the ethico-moral domain. See, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), who, for his part, summarized the contemporary ethical options in the chapter title: “Aristotle or Nietzsche?” (“The defensibility of the Nietzschean position turns in the end on the answer to the question: was it right in the first place to reject Aristotle? [p. 117]).
- 7 *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, pp. 22-23; and *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, p. 269.
- 8 On the notion of “dramatization,” see *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, pp. 75-79.
- 9 See *What is Philosophy?*, p. 74: “There is not the slightest reason for thinking that modes of existence need transcendent values by which they could be compared selected, and judged relative to one another. There are only immanent criteria. A possibility of life is evaluated through itself in the movements it lays out and the intensities it creates on a plane of immanence: what is not laid out or created is rejected. A mode of existence is good or bad, noble or vulgar, complete or empty, independently of Good or Evil or any transcendent value: there are never any criteria other than the tenor of existence, the intensification of life.”
- 10 See *Difference and Repetition*, p. 41.
- 11 For instance, in a famous text, which in some respects parallels Nietzsche’s analyses in the *Genealogy of Morals*, Spinoza showed how the notion of the Law arose among the Hebrews from a misunderstanding of affective relations. When God forbade Adam to eat the fruit of the Garden of Eden, he did so because he knew it would affect Adam’s body like a poison, decomposing its constitutive relation. But Adam, unable to perceive these affective relations, mistook the prohibition for a commandment, the effect of decomposition as a punishment, and the word of God as a Law. Spinoza, Letter 19, to Blijenbergh, in *Collected Works*, pp. 357-361.

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On the important question, “Can there be inherently evil modes of existence?” see Deleuze’s article, “The Letters on Evil (Correspondence with Blyenbergh),” in *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, pp. 30-43.

11 Leibniz, *New Essays*, chapters 20 and 21; *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence*, ed. H. G. Alexander (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1956), Leibniz’s Fifth Paper, §§14-17, pp. 58-60.

12 Leibniz, *New Essays*, pp. 165, 188.

13 Leibniz, *New Essays*, p. 166.

14 Seminar of 24 November 1987.

15 *Daybreak* 129.

16 Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, p. 171, 176.

17 Deleuze, “Nietzsche and Saint Paul,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, p. 49.

18 “On Capitalism and Desire,” interview with Deleuze and Guattari in *Actuel*, reprinted in *Desert Islands and Other Texts*, ed. Sylvère Lotinger, trans. Michael Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), p. 157.

19 Deleuze, Seminar of 20 May 1980.