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Difference and Givenness: Deleuze's Transcendental Empiricism and the Ontology of Immanence by Levi R. Bryant

Review by Mark Edward¹

Introduction

In a reading group two years ago a colleague stated 'I do not know much about that Deleuze, but I do know that I do not like him!' Their presumptive dismissal was constructed on the false premise that Gilles Deleuze was just another French postmodern philosopher. If *Difference and Givenness* was published at this point, Levi R. Bryant's analysis of Deleuze would have been a more than adequate response to my colleague's dismissal; a book that carefully, and convincingly, argues that Deleuze is more appropriately classified as a hyper-rationalist (ix).

In this review I have set myself the objective of considering how the non-philosopher can approach Bryant's *Difference and Givenness*. The review is unable to provide the in-depth critical analysis that *Difference and Givenness* deserves, yet it will highlight its interdisciplinary relevance. The review is composed of three sections. In the first section I provide a general outline of Gilles Deleuze and discuss the main goals of Bryant's *Difference and Givenness*. The second section considers if Deleuze's "transcendental empiricism" is important for non-philosophers. The concluding section is some brief political questions that arise from Bryant's tragic classification of Deleuze's transcendental empiricism and ontology of immanence.

Deleuze and Philosophy

Arguably, Deleuze is a misunderstood philosopher in the Anglophone world, partly a result of the excessive and rhetorical language of *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, leading his classification by some scholars as another postmodern philosopher.² However, since the English translations of *Difference and Repetition* (1994) and *Logic of Sense* (1991) there has been the emergence of another Deleuze that challenges his connection to postmodern philosophy. *Difference and Givenness* is a welcome addition in the reinterpretation of Deleuze, one that engages with Deleuze's magnum-opus *Difference and Repetition*. Bryant does not take long to separate Deleuze from postmodernism, claiming that Deleuze does not accept the postmodern positions that remained tied to the premise of the primacy of a subject or culture as foundational (p18). However, the reinterpretation is no easy task and has

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² Defining postmodernism is a difficult and somewhat impossible exercise. If, for the sake of this review, we regard postmodernism as being connected to textual analysis, the linguistic turn, and the intertextuality of floating signs then we can safely state that Deleuze is not a postmodern philosopher. However, this does not mean he has nothing in common with other French philosophers during that period. For the similarities and differences of Deleuze and Derrida see John Protevi & Paul Patton, eds., [Between Deleuze and Derrida](#)

even led some commentators (e.g. Slavoj Žižek) to argue for a Deleuze removed of the ‘bad-Guattarian’ influence.

The benefit of Bryant’s *Difference and Givenness* is that we find a different Deleuze, a Deleuze more at ‘home’ in the traditional canon of philosophy and one influenced from German idealism, especially Kant. This influence has functioned as catalysis for Deleuze to create transcendental empiricism, even if this catalysis has led Deleuze to overturn Kant in a similar fashion to Marx’s overturning of Hegel. Overall, it is Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism that is the focus of *Difference and Givenness*, which provides an in-depth critical outline and analysis of what Deleuze is aiming to achieve from transcendental empiricism.

On the whole, Bryant focuses on Deleuze’s singularly authored publications and the most influential are: *Difference and Repetition*; *Logic of Sense*; *How to Recognise Structuralism*; *Cinema 1 & 2*; and *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*. From a close reading of these texts, and others, Bryant carefully takes the reader through transcendental empiricism, explaining the philosophical problem that it aims to solve. However, Bryant is aware that the appearance of transcendental next to empiricism is a strange combination that sounds contradictory. Bryant explains why Deleuze produces the strange combination for a non-representational ontology:

One does not adopt the position of transcendental empiricism because it is against representation. Rather one adopts the position because something is wrong with the philosophy of representation and transcendental empiricism is able to solve this problem. (p4)

It is here that Bryant identifies the purpose of *Difference and Givenness* that avoids a romanticisation of Deleuze to understand the rationale of Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism. Accordingly, Bryant situates Deleuze’s creation of transcendental empiricism in relation to a specific philosophical problem, when philosophy falls into insoluble problems when identity and representation are taken as metaphysical *a priori*. A problem, I claim, that is not limited to philosophy and evident in different academic disciplines and everyday life. The solution of transcendental empiricism is that it critiques the image of thought contingent throughout different academic disciplines and various aspects of life in general.

Deleuze’s “Superior Empiricism”

In a clear and concise conclusion Bryant is able to explain why Deleuze is both critical of empiricism and views empiricism as the ‘saviour’ of philosophy. There are three specific problems with empiricism. First, it only recognises external differences; second, it traces the transcendental from the empirical; and third, there is a privileging of recognition. These three problems all culminate in producing what Deleuze refers to as the image of thought. However, despite empiricism having these problems, Bryant is able to argue why Deleuze still self-identifies himself and transcendental empiricism as empiricism. Bryant writes,

The empiricism of Hume, as Deleuze articulates it, begins not with the question of how a subject can know an object, nor with how subjects produce objects or objects produce subjects, but rather with the question of how both subjects and objects can be produced out of a field that does

not assume them in advance. It is here that we can begin to see how “superior empiricism” avoids the fallacy of empiricism. Transcendental empiricism does not assume in advance what subjects and objects ought to be in the sense of formal essences, but instead sees them as productions out of a field of immanence where is immanence is immanent to nothing save itself. (p265)

Bryant’s accurate description of Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism is of political significance and something that requires attention. Too often scholars and political decisions in the ‘real world’ assume the presence of some formed subject as a pre-given entity. The problem is that their emergence is not accounted for. This image of thought becomes an unreflected assumption that enters into their ontological preferences and serves to produce knowledge and/or political decisions. For example, despite micro-economics bottom-up credentials in terms of its analysis it still assumes a pre-given subject as the condition of its knowledge. While micro-economics largely avoids top-down structuralism their narrative of agency comes from a rational-subject that makes decisions in the market-place. The problem of the rational-subject explanation is that it becomes something that is used to explain economic-decisions and the subject is not in-itself explained. A common-sense assumption is universalised to the effect of proclaiming “all subjects are rational, subject x is human and therefore rational in the market.” The advantage of Deleuze’s “superior empiricism” is that this type of subject would not be enough for explaining the dynamics of the market. The emergence of the subject out of a field of immanence would become the important phenomenon for transcendental empiricism. If this explanation is not provided, then immanence would become immanent to the rational subject, generating a conditioned centre from what a subject ought to be. The solution of Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism is that the field of immanence is pre-individual and impersonal, composed of singularities that can, or cannot, be actualised. The task of the researcher is therefore is reveal what intensive processes are producing these actualisations that form objects and subjects.

A Tragic Deleuze

Bryant’s assessment of Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism is one that stresses a tragic interpretation, where the subject is not master of events and a form of stoicism is advantageous: “Being is not, for Deleuze, our creation” (p12). Deleuze, unlike Kant, does not assume the presence of a subject (i.e. Kant’s transcendental subject) and, contentiously, is able to free himself from correlationism, the view that it is impossible to conceptualise a world without humans and humans apart from the world. However, Bryant argues the subject is not completely dead, and the illusion of the subject is something that Deleuze maintains. The issue is what sort of politics, and political action, can emerge from Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism?

Despite the shortcomings of deconstructive textual analysis, its political effectiveness comes from the capacity to identify dominant and repressive discourses that construct our life and shape identities. If transcendental empiricism and its transcendental field of singularities are accepted then what type of politics emerges? I ask because the possibility of Deleuzian politics should emerge from his ontology. My own hesitant answer would be to turn to *A Thousand Plateaus* without forgetting

Difference and Repetition and *Logic of Sense*.³ Specifically, the main interest would be in Deleuze and Guattari's third major type of strata: alloplastic strata. This consists of two emergent properties of humans (technology and language) that represent the hand-tool symbiosis and the capacity for translatable expression. Importantly, Deleuze and Guattari do not view these as transcendental conditions, but within time. It is the properties of alloplastic strata that represent the capacity to modify the 'external' environment to construct new realities – and not only the construction of new meanings. However, the 'political agency' of alloplastic strata cannot be an anthropocentric and must consider the reality of non-human agents. As Deleuze and Guattari write,

It is difficult to elucidate the system of the strata without seeming to introduce a kind of cosmic or even spiritual evolution from one to the other, as if they were arranged in stages and ascended degrees of perfection. Nothing of this sort. The different figures of content and expression are not stages. There is no biosphere or noosphere, but everywhere the same Mechanosphere. (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, p. 77)

The issue is whether Deleuze's transcendental empiricism is compatible with the political and constructivist agency they outline in *A Thousand Plateaus*, or, is Žižek correct to negate the Guattarian influenced Deleuze?

Conclusion

Difference and Givenness will deservedly become one of the finest analyses of Deleuze. It is a book I look forward to re-reading and assume there is much I have missed out in my first reading. In reviewing *Difference and Givenness* from a non-philosophical background I hope that I have not unjustly placed it outside its designed audience. Instead, the purpose of the review was to indicate that *Difference and Givenness* has interdisciplinary merits that make it a worthwhile read for all academics.

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³ One of the main thinkers who have done the most with the connection between Difference and Repetition is John Protevi. See especially John Protevi, [Political Physics: Deleuze, Derrida, and the Body Politic](#)

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