



Publication details, information for authors and referees and full contents available at: <http://global-discourse.com/>

ISSN: 2043-7897

Suggested citation:

Srnicek, N. (2010) 'Review of "Difference and Givenness: Deleuze's Transcendental Empiricism and the Ontology of Immanence" by Levi R. Bryant', *Global Discourse* [Online], 1: 1, available from: <<http://global-discourse.com/contents>>.

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

Review by Nick Srnicek<sup>1</sup>

Against the increasingly repetitive recitations of Deleuzian concepts, and the endless introductory works, Levi Bryant is bold enough to finally take Deleuze at his word - as a metaphysician through and through.<sup>2</sup> The greatness of Bryant's *Difference and Givenness* is to restore Deleuze to his true habitat, to the grand tradition of philosophical questions that have been raised since Descartes, Hume, Leibniz and Kant. Classical questions about topics such as the intelligible and the sensible, empiricism and rationalism, the noumenal and the phenomenal. Moreover, Bryant channels his piercing and articulate focus on the most difficult and most important of Deleuze's works – *Difference and Repetition*.

It is my contention here, however, that Bryant's makes two important contributions above and beyond placing Deleuze directly in debate with classical philosophical concerns. The first of these is to signal the specifically *realist* aspects of Deleuze. Against phenomenology, "social constructivism or anti-realism", Bryant will argue that the "Ideas uncovered in the encounter are real, independent of subjectivity". (13) It is this realist aspect which ultimately distinguishes Deleuze both from German idealism and the postmodern *doxa*, making him an untimely philosopher for his era. It is only recently, with the emergence of speculative realism, that Deleuze's constant insistence on the importance of ontology can be fully appreciated.

Bryant's other significant contribution is to argue for Deleuze as a "hyper-rationalist". (ix) Contra the readings of Deleuze which focus on the empirical aspects taking 'transcendental empiricism' to simply be some odd conjunction of Hume and Kant, and contra Nietzschean affirmationist readings which believe Deleuze's critique of the image of thought to license willful obscurity and wild speculation, Bryant reveals the hard critical core of Deleuze's thought. Prior to the non-sense of *The Logic of Sense* and prior to the free play of desiring-machines in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze first had to pass through the critical rigors of the Kantian and post-Kantian tradition. It is in *Difference & Repetition* that Deleuze sparred most explicitly with these philosophical heavyweights, and as such, any philosophical understanding of Deleuze must come to terms with the difficulties this text presents.

In arguing for both a realist and rationalist interpretation of Deleuze, however, Bryant simultaneously brings Deleuze into direct debate with contemporary work in speculative realism. Before raising these issues, though, we must first examine the claim that Deleuze is a rationalist realist.

As Bryant notes, one of the persistent themes of Deleuze's work is the claim that his approach is a search for the conditions of real, not possible, experience. Against the standard Kantian approach which delineates the formal conditions that

<sup>1</sup> Nick Srnicek is an independent scholar.

<sup>2</sup> "I feel I am a pure metaphysician." Deleuze, Gilles. "Response to a Series of Questions", *Collapse*, Vol. III, 42.

make *any* experience possible, Deleuze will search for conditions that are no greater than that which they condition. At issue here is more than just the specificity of the approach. Rather, the shift from possible to real conditions effectively overturns one of the key Kantian divisions: that between concepts and intuitions. For Kant, the external difference between these two poses all sorts of (ultimately irresolvable) problems. For if our experience is always a concrete mixture of the two, we need to be able to explain how these two independent functions can coalesce into the unity we find in experience. Ultimately, though, Kant is unable to resolve this dilemma. The resulting problem is that we have no account within Kant's system of how concepts could condition intuitions. As Bryant makes clear, the only solution to this difficulty is to efface the external difference between concepts and intuitions, and "discover intelligibility in the aesthetic itself, in the very fabric of the given". (ix-x) From a formal *conditioning* between concepts external to intuitions, we now have a *genesis* of concepts out of intelligible intuitions. "*Here we see elements of Deleuze's rationalism as opposed to his alleged empiricism in that Deleuze is led to rationalize intuitions themselves.* For Deleuze, the difference between a concept and an intuition is the difference between a clear intuition and a confused perception." (28)

The question then, is what do we find if we search for intelligibility *within* the sensible? Bryant is quick to answer that:

*Deleuze, following Maimon, locates these [transcendental] conditions in the differentials (in the sense of calculus) of experience, which allows him to (1) pose a continuity between the sensible and the intelligible such that the sensible is the intelligible and the intelligible the sensible; (2) posit a real genesis of experience capable of going all the way to the singular individual without a gap between concepts and intuitions; and (3) undermine the opposition between the finite and the infinite. (41)*

It is the concept of differentials (the pure relation between dynamic infinitesimals) which allows Deleuze to overcome the problems of Kantian conditioning, and to account for the genesis of real experience, while also avoiding the constraint of finitude. A set of these differentials comprise what Bryant will call a "morphological, topological or genetic essence [that] contains within them all the possible variations of the phenomena in question on the basis of a sort of topological diagram capable of expressing the becoming of the essence". (44-5)

But facing up to the critical problem, how do we come to *know* these topological essences? Our everyday experience appears well-ordered and as subjects, we experience unified objects acting in a predictable manner. But the question is poorly posed since 'knowledge' suggests applying a formal concept to recognize an intuition as content; i.e. precisely what we're trying to escape from. Knowledge in its standard sense must take on a secondary and derivative role. As Christian Kerslake concisely notes, "Knowledge itself is preceded by the posing of questions, that is, by thought."<sup>3</sup> Therefore instead of knowledge, "Deleuze contrasts [it with] an existential conception of thought based on a startling encounter of an amorous or violent nature". (76) It is in the encounter that we face up to the differentials typically covered over by the constraints of recognition. In line with Deleuze's amorous or violent conception of

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<sup>3</sup> Kerslake, Christian. "The Vertigo of Philosophy: Deleuze and the Problem of Immanence." *Radical Philosophy* 118: 10.

thought, Bryant will say, “the object of the encounter is the occasion of thought, but not that which is to be thought” (93) – a formulation which also makes clear the necessary immanence of thought to being. Rather than thought operating externally to being and appropriating it in a representational structure, thought is pushed or forced by being to think. Bryant clearly illustrates the entire passage of this encounter, from its initial moment as a *sentendum* announcing the differential that problematizes habitual experience, to the *memorandum* through which the problem (the virtual differentials) is posed in its positivity, to the *cogitandum* as the explication of the problem as a topological essence.

At this point, it is clear that we don’t “know” the problematic Ideas or topological essences in any standard sense. Rather, as Bryant argues, they are presupposed by knowledge and experienced through a method of *learning*. By being forced to undergo the experience of the encounter, thought undergoes an apprenticeship through which both thought and the Ideas are transformed. In this regard, in an important section, Bryant notes:

*it is not that the Ideas are independent of the faculties, that they are an existence apart from the faculties which the faculties which the faculties strive to represent; rather, the Ideas are produced by the disjunctive or disharmonious play of the faculties. In short, ideas are not an object or referent thought by the faculties, but are instead the very process the faculties undergo in being problematized. Consequently, we must not think ideas preexist thought. Rather, they only emerge in and through thought. (148)*

The importance of this section is that it (1) makes clear the ways in which being and thought are intertwined in Deleuze’s work, and as a result, (2) makes clear the problems such a relation brings for Deleuze’s realism. If real Ideas are indissociable from thought, then what Deleuze offers is a continuum between being and thought.

This conception of thought that Deleuze and Bryant refer to is clearly *not* the property of an individuated subject. As Bryant will reiterate through *Difference and Givenness*, subjects are themselves individuated out of topological essences. It is the Ideas’ independence from subjects that ultimately lends them their realist status. The problematic question that remains, however, is whether or not the continuum between being and thought that lies at the basis of Deleuze’s project is sustainable in the face of recent speculative realist work. Is there not an irresolvable contradiction between Deleuze’s continuum and the apparently basic definition of realism as an ontology independent of thought? The risk with a continuity between being and thought is that we end up importing all the vitalist and subjective prejudices we have as human beings into the properly inhuman world of objects and ancestral events. As with Hegel, Deleuze believes that his notion of a non-representational, non-empirical field of difference articulates the logic of being. Yet it’s not clear that being need be intelligible in this way. Or in other words, while we can unequivocally support the thesis that it is being that thinks (and not a subject, for example), it is not at all clear that thought is co-extensive with being. The key question here, then, is whether the death of the subject is sufficient, or whether we need to work towards an understanding of the death of thought as such.

On the other hand, it is perhaps the case that Deleuze offers an alternative way forward for speculative realism. Rather than offering an irresolvable disjunction between being and thought (one that, for example, Quentin Meillassoux has had to

overcome by invoking *ex nihilo* emergence), the continuum may offer a path towards the progressive purging of thought's influence. That is to say, if the continuum extends between the two poles of being and thought, then a method that progressively subtracted thought could attain the real, while still maintaining an important path for the reverse movement – from the non-phenomenal ancestral realm to the phenomenology of intelligible experience.<sup>4</sup> The key question in this case is to what *extent* can a realist ontology be expressed by thought?

Any future project in this Deleuzian vein would need to uncover a realist temporality untethered from the syntheses of consciousness, as well as the syntheses of life (as Martin Hägglund's excellent book on Derrida implicitly makes clear<sup>5</sup>). A realist temporality disconnected from the neurological (that is to say, evolutionarily contingent) production of folk temporality: the linear, continuous, and flowing sense of time (which is the presupposition and ultimate object of explanation for both Deleuze and Derrida's foundational accounts of time). If consciously experienced time is a mere function of neurological constraints,<sup>6</sup> then speculative conclusions about a realist ontology cannot legitimately be extracted from conscious time as a basis. A new foundation needs to be constructed.

Regardless of which way one eventually proceeds though – with or against Deleuze – it is certain that Bryant's book forms one of the central texts for coming to terms with Deleuze's unique variation on rationalist realism.

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<sup>4</sup> To prevent any misunderstanding, the continuum evoked here can and should be analytically distinguished from the correlation that Meillassoux has brought to light. Whereas the correlation requires that being and thought necessarily occur together at all times, the continuum merely offers their mixture as the in-between of the two poles.

<sup>5</sup> My thanks go to Nathan Brown for pointing out this residual problem in Hägglund's work. The notion of finite being that Hägglund extracts from Derrida's writings is focused centrally on *living* beings, without being able to account for the 'absolute death' involved in the inhuman realm.

<sup>6</sup> See Thomas Metzinger's *Being No One* for an excellent analysis of how the 'now' is produced as a result of various brain processes.