

DELEUZE AND NORMATIVITY

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Between 1933 and 1945, Nazi Germany systematically dismantled German democracy, violated international law, and perpetrated countless horrific crimes against humanity—chief among them the extermination of ten million people, approximately six million of whom were Jews. Between 1948 and 1994, Nelson Mandela and other activists engaged in a bloody but ultimately successful battle against the racist government of South Africa in an effort to abolish apartheid. Most people would regard the actions of the Nazis as morally reprehensible and the actions of the anti-apartheid freedom fighters as morally praiseworthy. Although both used violence in the pursuit of political ends, only the latter were allegedly morally justified in doing so. Why is this the case? On what grounds do we morally condemn the Nazis but morally praise the freedom fighters?

These and similar questions are questions about political normativity—the moral criteria by which we judge the actions, policies, and, in some instances, the very existence of political entities. Politico-normative criteria often involve moral concepts such as justice, rights, and equality which, though related to other moral concepts such as the right and the good, apply specifically to political entities rather than individual persons. The overarching concern of political normativity, therefore, is: how ought political institutions to conduct themselves? This includes internal questions (e.g., what laws, policies, or principles ought states to implement?) as well as external questions (e.g., how ought states to act with regard to other states?).

Theories of political normativity often attempt to provide answers to the sorts of questions mentioned above in terms of justice, which is without a doubt the preeminent value of modern political philosophy. Generally speaking, a state is regarded as “just” if it implements just laws, policies, and social norms and acts justly toward its own citizens as well as those of other states. But this merely begs a further question, one that lies at the heart of the

Western political tradition, namely, what is justice? Answers to this question are, of course, many and varied, but all of them take for granted that justice is the fundamental value in determining how political entities ought to conduct their affairs.

Although this approach to political philosophy is hardly new (Plato and Aristotle, not to speak of countless other ancients, were all preoccupied with questions of justice),¹ it did not “come of age,” as it were, until the Enlightenment. For thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, normativity (both moral and political) was inexorably connected to related liberal concepts such as universal rationality and autonomous subjectivity. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, such concepts fell prey to severe criticisms by the likes of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Since that time, postmodern philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze have pushed these criticisms to their limit, completely jettisoning the ontological, epistemological, and moral presuppositions upon which much of Enlightenment thought is founded.

At the same time, it is clear that Deleuze—both in his work as a philosopher and as a political activist—believed that certain political institutions are to be recommended and others rejected.² How is this possible given Deleuze’s wholesale rejection of Enlightenment concepts such as justice, autonomy, and transcendental normativity? In this essay, my aim is to provide an answer to this question by exploring Deleuze’s political philosophy. As I shall argue, although Deleuze rejects certain conceptions of normativity—most importantly the transcendental and universalizable normativity underlying liberal thought—he does not reject normativity *tout court*. Rather, he formulates an entirely new concept of normativity which is categorical without being transcendental—in other words, an immanent conception of normativity.

Writ large, normativity refers to imperatives, duties, obligations, permissions, and principles which do not describe the way the world is but rather prescribe the way it ought to be.³ Morality, which may be regarded as a subset of normativity, concerns laws, principles, and norms which prescribe how human beings ought and ought not to act.⁴ To this extent, it is principally concerned with expressing what is right (i.e., what ought to be done) as opposed to what is good (i.e., what is worth being valued, promoted, protected, pursued, etc). The latter is the purview of axiology or ethics—the study of what is good or valuable for human beings and, by extension, what constitutes a good life.⁵

For the ancients, the ethical question of “how one should live” (i.e., what constitutes a good life) was of primary importance. As Todd May notes, it “involves a particular way of approaching life. It views life as having a shape: a life—a human life—is a whole that might be approached by way of asking how it should unfold.”⁶ This life, moreover, is judged vis-à-vis its relationship to the cosmological order—the “great chain of being”—in which it is situated. At the summit of this order is the Form of the Good (for Plato) or the specifically human *telos* known as *eudaimonia* (for Aristotle) “which ought to be mirrored or conformed to by the lives of human beings.”⁷ The good or the valuable is “above” the realm of human experience because it is, in some sense, more real. Consequently, the things of this world are always striving not only to become better but to be—that is, to exist in the fullest and most real sense.⁸ In the case of human beings, success in this striving is manifested in *arête*—that is, excellence or virtue.

As May points out, the question “How should one live?” was gradually replaced by another one—viz., “How should one act?”⁹ Enlightenment philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Jeremy Bentham were no longer concerned with what constitutes a good life [the ethical question] but with how one ought or ought not to act [the normative or moral question]. In truth, the origins of this shift can be traced to a much earlier period—to wit, the Christian Middle Ages.¹⁰ During that time, the classical concept of virtue is at first eclipsed by

but ultimately fused with the Hebraic concept of law. In medieval Christianity, material (hence human) reality is no longer considered good (albeit less good than the realm of the Forms) but fallen. Consequently, material things—including human beings—are “reluctant, recalcitrant, [and] resistant” to the good.¹¹ They must be compelled through the force of laws, prescriptions, imperatives, and commandments which are given directly by God or else embedded in human nature itself.¹²

Despite its emphasis on law rather than excellence, the Christian concept of normativity nonetheless maintains the assumption of a hierarchical cosmological order. Modern moral philosophers like Kant, Bentham, and Mill repudiate this idea in two crucial ways: first, by shifting the focus of moral judgment to individual subjects, as opposed to the relation of human life in general to a larger cosmological whole; and second, by rejecting the idea of a “great chain of being”—i.e., a qualitative ontological hierarchy with God (or the Forms) at the top and brute matter at the bottom.¹³ Consequently, morality is no longer concerned with the shape lives take; rather, it establishes the moral boundaries or limits of human action. As long as one acts within said boundaries, the direction one’s life as a whole takes is entirely up to him or her; it is, in a word, a “private concern.”¹⁴

Morality, as opposed to ethics, is not “integrated into our lives”; rather, “it exists out there, apart from the rest of our existence.”¹⁵ Whether the ultimate foundation of said morality is the divine commandments of God or the dictates of an abstract moral law (e.g., Kant’s categorical imperative or Bentham’s principle of utility), it is no longer situated in our world or woven into the fabric of our experiences. It is exterior, transcendent, other. When this view of morality is introduced into the political realm, the result is liberalism—a theory which begins with the abstract concept of “individuals” and equally abstract concepts such as “rights” and “liberties.” Its founding question is “why and under what conditions should these individuals come together and allow themselves to be governed?”¹⁶

Much of this changes in the nineteenth century with Nietzsche. As Lewis Call notes, “[Nietzsche’s] dispersed, nonlinear, aphoristic style combines with his powerfully

destabilizing genealogical method to produce a thinking which calls everything into question . . . [which] lays waste to every received truth of the modern world, including those of science, politics, and religion.”¹⁷ Nietzsche’s most radical moves are without question his announcement of the death of God¹⁸ and his systematic critique of traditional morality.¹⁹ In one fell swoop, Nietzsche not only destroys the idea of “theological existence” but with it “the transcendence in which our morality is grounded.”²⁰ This gives rise to a new question: not “how should one live?” or “how should one act?” but rather “how might one live?” In lieu of any transcendent “outside” to constrain our actions or establish what sorts of lives are worthwhile for us to pursue, we are free to pursue new ambitions and projects, to explore new ways of being—in short, to discover with Spinoza “what a body is capable of.”²¹

The trend in philosophy known as “post-modernism,” of which Deleuze is unquestionably a part, is often said to begin with Nietzsche (as well as Freud and Marx). This claim is not without warrant, since all of the typical postmodern gestures—e.g., “incredulity towards metanarratives, a suspicious attitude towards the unified and rational self characteristic of much post-Enlightenment philosophy . . . a powerfully critical stance towards any and all forms of power . . . a critical awareness of the ways in which language can produce, reproduce, and transmit power [etc.]”²²—were first made by Nietzsche. The question of “how might one live?” is the cornerstone of Deleuze’s philosophy.²³ Far from merely reiterating Nietzsche’s answers to this question, however, Deleuze systematically reinvents them. In the next section I will explore this reinvention in greater detail.

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The primary focus of Deleuze’s early works is metaphysics and the history of philosophy. Though they can hardly be called “apolitical,” the political dimension of books like *Difference and Repetition* (1968) tends to be so vague and understated as to require extraction by skilled exegetes.²⁴ Nevertheless, a few ideas from these works are worth noting in brief detail in order to understand Deleuze’s later, more explicitly political endeavors. The first is Deleuze’s critique of the subject. As we noted

above, liberal political philosophy—not to speak of modern philosophy more generally—begins with the concept of the individual, self-identical subject (as opposed to non-subjective concepts such as essences, substances, or, in the political realm, sovereigns). Within this framework, the subject is not only conceptually distinct from the world but substantially distinct; it is, in a word, beyond or transcendent of it. This is because the subject (which is immaterial and active) constitutes the world (which is physical and passive). To this extent, moreover, the subject is superior to the world because it gives form and content to an otherwise empty and inert “prime matter.”

Deleuze denies this dualistic picture of reality. Following Spinoza, he instead claims that there is only one Being or substance which expresses itself differentially through an infinite number of attributes (chief among them thought and extension) which are in turn expressed through an infinite number of modes. Because Being is univocal, the world and everything it contains—from physical objects to mental constructions—cannot be articulated in terms of relations of self-contained identity.²⁵ It does not follow from anything, it is not subordinated to anything, and it does not resemble anything; it expresses and is expressed in turn:

Expression is on the one hand an explication, an unfolding of what expresses itself, the One manifesting itself in the Many. . . . Its multiple expression, on the other hand, involves Unity. The One remains involved in whatever expresses it, imprinted in what unfolds it, immanent in whatever manifests it.²⁶

All being is immanent; there is no transcendence, thus there are no self-contained identities outside the world (gods, values, subjectivities, etc) that determine or constitute it.²⁷ Furthermore, substance is at root a difference that exists virtually in the past and is actualized in various modes in the present.²⁸ These modes are not stable identities but multiplicities, “swarms of difference,” complicated intersections of forces.²⁹ “There is no universal or transcendental subject, which could function as the bearer of universal human rights, but only variable and historically diverse ‘processes of subjectivation.’”³⁰

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The Cartesio-Kantian subject which underlies modern politico-philosophical thought is therefore a fiction. It neither transcends the world nor is transcended by anything else in turn. But there is another key concept that underlies much modern thought—the concept of rationality. Simply put, rationality involves an alleged direction of fit between our thoughts and the world (theoretical rationality) or between our desires/moral beliefs and our actions (practical rationality). Both conceptions involve the idea of representation—our thoughts are rational to the extent that they accurately represent the world (i.e., are true); our actions, in turn, are rational to the extent that they accurately represent our desires/moral beliefs.³¹

Ever since Kant, moral philosophers have tended to regard rationality as the foundation of normativity. As Christine Korsgaard puts it, “Strictly speaking, we do not disapprove the action because it is vicious; instead, it is vicious because we disapprove it. Since morality is grounded in human sentiments, the normative question cannot be whether its dictates are true. Instead, it is whether we have reason to be glad that we have such sentiments, and to allow ourselves to be governed by them.”³² The point here is that an immoral action—one which we ought not to perform—is one which we have a rational reason not to perform.

What distinguishes normativity from conventional modes of practical reasoning is the universalizable or categorical nature of the rational reason in question—i.e., the fact that in all relevantly similar circumstances it applies equally to all moral agents at all times. Typically this rational reason has taken the form of a universal moral principle, such as Kant’s categorical imperative (“so act on that maxim which you can at the same time will to be a universal law”) or Bentham’s principle of utility (“act so as to bring about the greatest happiness for the greatest number. It is precisely this universal and abstract character which makes normativity “transcendent” in the sense outlined earlier.

Deleuze regards this concept of rationality, no less than the concept of the subject, as a fiction: “Representation fails to capture the affirmed world of difference. Representation has only a single center, a unique and receding perspective, and in consequence a false depth. It

mediates everything, but mobilizes and moves nothing.”³³ The problem with this “dogmatic image of thought” is that it relies on representation, and difference (read: substance) cannot be represented through linguistic categories. This is because linguistic categorization assumes that the things it aims to represent are fixed, stable, and self-identical, which, as we noted above, they are not. The difference at the heart of being is fluid, constantly overflowing the boundaries of representation.³⁴ In the place of representational language, Deleuze offers what he calls a “logic of sense” (which, for the sake of brevity, we shall not explore here).³⁵

Deleuze’s political philosophy as outlined in the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*³⁶ may be seen as an extension of his earlier ontology. Like all of Deleuze’s works, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* is so formidably dense and complicated that we cannot begin to do it justice in an essay of this size. Instead we will limit ourselves to a brief “thematic overview” of those ideas and concepts which are relevant to understanding the role of normativity in Deleuze’s political thought. As we noted earlier, liberal political theory begins with “already constituted individuals, each with his or her interests,” just as the dogmatic image of thought begins with “already constituted identities, each with its qualities.”³⁷ The foundational question of liberalism posed earlier—viz., “why and under what conditions should these individuals come together and allow themselves to be governed”—is a question concerning the relation between individuals and governments. Like the relation between mind and world in the dogmatic image of thought, the relation between individuals and governments in liberal theory is one of representation. As Todd May notes, “If a government is to be a legitimate one, the interests of each individual must be represented in the public realm occupied by government. . . . [Thus] liberal theory is a form of the dogmatic image of thought.”³⁸

Just as Deleuze replaces the foundational modern concept of identity with the concept of difference, so does he replace the concept of the individual subject with other concepts such as the *machine*. In Deleuze’s political ontology, individuals, communities, states, and the various relations that obtain among them are all understood as machines or “machinic” pro-

cesses. Unlike an organism, which is “a bounded whole with an identity and an end,” and unlike a mechanism, which is “a closed machine with a specific function,” a machine is “nothing more than its connections; it is not made by anything, and has no closed identity.”³⁹ Whereas liberalism regards the relation between individuals and society mechanistically (i.e., as a “specific set of connections”) or organically (i.e., “as a self-organizing whole”), Deleuze regards this relation “machinically” (i.e., “as only one level of connections that can be discussed”).⁴⁰

Unlike the static, self-contained, and transcendental subject of liberal theory, machines are fluid, mobile, and dynamic; they are capable of changing, of connecting and reconnecting with other machines, they are immanent to the connections they make, and vice versa. In creating these connections, moreover, machines produce and are produced by desires (hence “desiring-machines”).⁴¹ The liberal subject consents to be governed because it lacks the ability to realize its own interests independently of the state. Machines, in contrast, “do not operate out of lack. They do not seek to fulfill needs. Instead they produce connections. Moreover, the connections they produce are not pre-given. . . . Machines are productive in unpredictable and often novel ways.”⁴²

There are different types of machines which can be distinguished according to how they operate. In all cases, machines are driven by fuel, which Deleuze variously describes as power (especially in his book on Foucault)⁴³ or, more typically, *forces*. Deleuze distinguishes between two types of force to which he assigns different names in different books. On the one hand there is what he refers to as “active force” in his book on Nietzsche and as “social” or “oedipal” force in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. On the other hand there is what he refers to as “reactive force,” “forces of desire,” or “schizophrenic” force. What are these forces and how do they operate according to Deleuze?

In one decidedly aphoristic passage, Deleuze claims there are only forces of desire (i.e., active or schizophrenic forces) and social (i.e., reactive or oedipal) forces.⁴⁴ A force of desire or active force is one which “goes to the limit of its power,” i.e., which expresses itself

creatively to the fullest extent of its ability, which produces rather than represses its object.⁴⁵ Social or reactive forces, in contrast, “decompose; they separate active force from what it can do; they take away a part or almost all of its power . . . they dam up, channel, and regulate” the flow of desire.⁴⁶ In making this distinction, Deleuze does not mean to suggest that there are two distinct kinds of forces which differentially affect objects exterior to themselves. On the contrary, there is only a single, unitary force which manifests itself in particular “assemblages.”⁴⁷ Each of these assemblages, in turn, contains within itself both desire (active force) and various “bureaucratic or fascist pieces” (reactive force) which seek to subjugate and annihilate that desire.⁴⁸ Neither force acts or works upon preexistent objects; rather everything that exists is alternately created and/or destroyed in accordance with the particular assemblage which gives rise to it.

As May notes by way of summary, “power does not suppress desire; rather it is implicated in every assemblage of desire.”⁴⁹ Machines are constituted (“assembled”) by forces that are immanent to them; “concrete social fields” are therefore affects of complex movements and connections of forces which vary in intensity over time.⁵⁰ For Deleuze, forces are principally distinguished according to their affects, which in turn are distinguished according to whether they are life-affirming or life-denying at the level of life itself.⁵¹ Unlike the concept of “coercive power,” which has a kind of built-in normativity, the concepts of life-affirming/denying are, in the first instance at least, purely descriptive; that is, they describe the way forces produce reality and nothing else.

Given the ubiquitous and ontologically constitutive nature of force, it goes without saying that force *simpliciter* cannot be “abolished” or even “resisted.” As we shall see, this does not mean that repressive social forces (or machines) cannot be opposed. It does imply, however, that for Deleuze, (as for Spinoza) the question is not whether and how resistance is possible, but rather how and why desire comes to repress and ultimately destroy itself in the first place.⁵² This requires, among other things, an analysis of the various assemblages that come into being over time (vis-à-vis their affects) as well as the experimental pursuit of alternative assemblages at the level of praxis.

According to Deleuze, repressive forces do not emanate from a unitary source but rather within multiple sites. The complex interconnection of these sites, moreover, is precisely what gives rise to the various machines that inhabit the social world (this is what he means when he suggests that power is “rhizomatic” as opposed to “arboreal”). This is not to say that power does not become concentrated within certain sites; indeed, much of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* is given over to an analysis of such concentrations as they manifest themselves in particular political and economic forms. What this analysis reveals is a constant conflict between reactive machines (e.g., the State-form) which seek to “overcode” and “territorialize” desire, and various desiring machines (e.g., the nomadic war machine), which seek to “reterritorialize” themselves along “lines of flight.” Similar analyses could no doubt be afforded of the “Church-form,” the “gender-form,” and countless other sites of concentrated power. In all such cases, however, one and the same force is simultaneously seeking to escape and re-conquer itself, and it is precisely this tension which allows ostensibly “revolutionary” or “liberatory” movements (e.g., Bolshevism) to occasionally metamorphose into totalitarian regimes (e.g., Stalinist Russia).

For Deleuze, then, political power is multifarious and rhizomatic in nature.⁵³ Unlike Marxism and other “strategic” political philosophies which identify a unitary locus of repressive power, the “tactical” political philosophy of Deleuze “perform[s] [its] analyses within a milieu characterized . . . by the tension between irreducible and mutually intersecting practices of power.”⁵⁴ In older radical philosophies such as anarchism, manifestations of power are distinguished according to their effects. These effects, in turn, are distinguished according to their relative justifiability within a universalizable normative scheme that is both prior and exterior to power itself. Repressive power, again, is only a species of “power to,” which is at least analogous if not identical to Deleuze’s all-encompassing “force.” The only real difference is that “repressive power” in the classical paradigm involves the forcible or even violent compulsion of bodies (what Foucault calls “biopower”) whereas repressive

forces in the Deleuze scheme principally work to subjugate desires.

This brings us to the question of how Deleuze reinvents the concept of political normativity. Some thinkers, most notably Paul Patton and Todd May, have attempted to situate Deleuze’s thought within the normative paradigm of classical liberalism. May, for example, tries to found Deleuze’s political philosophy on a pair of normative principles which, he thinks, are intimated below the surface of Deleuze’s writings. As I shall argue, although he is correct to point out that Deleuze “promotes” ways of thinking and acting that affirm life, this promotion need not—indeed, cannot—be cashed out in terms of liberal (or what I will call “nomological” normativity). In the next and last section, we will explore an alternative reading of Deleuze on normativity—one which relies on the concept of “absolute deterritorialization,” or what I will call “pragmatic norms.”

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In the final chapter of *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*, May rehearses the oft-repeated accusation that poststructuralism engenders a kind of moral nihilism.⁵⁵ Such an accusation is a product, May thinks, of the poststructuralists’ general unwillingness to “refer existence to transcendent values,” which as we noted is the dominant strategy of much traditional moral philosophy in the West.⁵⁶ Strangely, May goes to great lengths to explain why Deleuze rejects classical “ethics,” only to argue that certain of Deleuze’s other commitments implicitly contradict this rejection. As he notes:

[Deleuze] praises Spinoza’s *Ethics*, for instance, because it “replaces Morality.” . . . For Deleuze, as for Nietzsche, the project of measuring life against external standards constitutes a betrayal rather than an affirmation of life. Alternatively, an ethics of the kind Spinoza has offered . . . seeks out the possibilities life offers rather than denigrating life by appeal to “transcendent values.” Casting the matter in more purely Nietzschean terms, the project of evaluating a life by reference to external standards is one of allowing reactive forces to dominate active ones, where reactive forces are those which “separate active force from what it can do.”⁵⁷

In the same breath, however, May argues that Deleuze provides no explicit means by which to distinguish active forces from reactive ones beyond a vague appeal to “experimentation.”⁵⁸ Such a means, he thinks, can only be discovered by extracting “several intertwined and not very controversial ethical principles” from the hidden nooks of the Deleuzian corpus.

The first such principle, which May terms the “antirepresentationalist principle,” is that “practices of representing others to themselves—either in who they are or in what they want—ought, as much as possible to be avoided.”⁵⁹ The second, which he calls the “principle of difference,” holds that “alternative practices, all things being equal, ought to be allowed to flourish and even to be promoted.”⁶⁰ In both cases, May provides ample textual evidence to demonstrate that Deleuze (*inter alia*) is implicitly committed to the values underlying these principles. I think his analysis in this regard is very astute, as it is very clear from the foregoing that (for example) “Gilles Deleuze’s commitment to promoting different ways of thinking and acting is a central aspect of his thought.”⁶¹ What I take issue with is the idea that the avowal of such values, implicit or otherwise, is *a fortiori* an avowal of nomological normative principles.

As we noted above, the defining characteristics of nomological normativity are precisely abstraction, universality, and exteriority to life, all of which Deleuze seeks to undermine in his analysis of power. Although he argues that Deleuze’s unwillingness to prescribe universalizable norms is itself motivated by a commitment to the aforesaid principles, this amounts to claiming that Deleuze is self-referentially inconsistent; it does not lead, as May thinks, to a general absolution of the charge of moral nihilism. If it is true that Deleuze scorns representation and affirms difference—and I think it is—the operative values cannot be articulated and justified by means of representation or the suppression except on pain of dire contradiction. This is precisely the opposite of what May wishes to argue.

Paul Patton offers a much more promising idea—namely, that the “the overriding norm [for Deleuze] is that of deterritorialization.”⁶² In shifting the focus of political philosophy from static, transcendent concepts like “the

subject” and “rationality” to dynamic, immanent concepts such as “machinic processes,” “processes of subjectivation,” etc., Deleuze also shifts the focus of normativity from extensive to intensive criteria of normative judgment. As Patton notes, “What a given assemblage is capable of doing or becoming is determined by the lines of flight or deterritorialization it can sustain.”⁶³ Thus normative criteria will not only demarcate the application of power by a given assemblage but “will also find the means for the critique and modification of those norms.”⁶⁴ Put another way, political normativity must be capable not only of judging the activity of assemblages, but also of judging the norms to which said assemblages give rise. Such normativity is precisely what prevents the latent “micro-fascism of the avant garde” from blossoming into full-blown totalitarianism.

The normative principles which May attributes to Deleuze are problematic not because they are categorical but because they are transcendent—they stand outside of any and all particular assemblages and so cannot be self-reflexive. It is easy to see how such principles, however radical they may seem on the surface, can become totalitarian. To take a somewhat far-fetched but relevant example, the principle of anti-representationalism would effectively outlaw any processes of majoritarian representation, even in banal contexts such as homecoming competitions or bowling leagues. Likewise, the principle of difference would permit, or at least does not obviously prohibit, morally suspect “alternative practices” such as thrill-killing or rape. A year after the publication of *Poststructuralist Anarchism*, May amended his views somewhat, expanding them into a comprehensive moral theory.⁶⁵ The foundation of this theory is a revised version of the anti-representationalist principle, according to which “people ought not, other things being equal, to engage in practices whose effect, among others, is the representation of certain intentional lives as either intrinsically superior or intrinsically inferior to others.”⁶⁶ The principle of difference drops out of the picture altogether.

May buttresses the revised anti-representationalist principle with what he calls a “multi-value consequentialism.”⁶⁷ After suggesting that “moral values” are “goods to which peo-

ple ought to have access,”⁶⁸ he proceeds to argue that the “values” entailed by the anti-representationalist principle include “rights, just distributions, and other goods.”⁶⁹ May’s theory judges actions as “right” to the extent that (a) they do not violate the anti-representationalist principle nor (b) result in denying people goods to which they ought to have access. Whatever substantive objections one might raise against this theory would be quite beside the point. The problem, as we have already noted, is that the very idea of a “moral theory of poststructuralism” based on universalizable normative principles is oxymoronic. What distinguishes normativity from conventional modes of practical reasoning is the universalizable or categorical nature of the rational reason in question—i.e., the fact that in all relevantly similar circumstances it applies equally to all moral agents at all times. Typically this rational reason has taken the form of a universal moral principle, and to this extent, May’s “principle of anti-representationalism” is no different from Kant’s categorical imperative or Bentham’s principle of utility. It is precisely this universal and abstract character that makes normativity “transcendent” in the sense outlined earlier, and poststructuralism is nothing if not a systematic repudiation of transcendence.

Some would suggest that normativity of this sort is attractive precisely because it provides us with a reliable means by which to guide our actions. It is not at all clear, however, that this requires transcendental moral principles, especially if ordinary practical reasoning will suffice. Take, for example, the so-called prefigurative principle, which demands that any means employed be morally consistent with the desired ends; this is a practical principle or hypothetical imperative of the form “if you want *X* you ought to do *Y*.” Anarchism, a political theory whose adherents have historically affirmed the prefigurative principle, has long argued that incongruity between the means and the end is not pragmatically conducive to the achievement of the end. As such, it is not the case that one ought to do *Y* because it is the “morally right” thing to do, but because it is the most sensible course of action given one’s desire to achieve *X*. A principle of this sort can be regarded as categorical or even universalizable, but it is scarcely “transcendental.”

Its justification is immanent to its purpose, just as the means are immanent to the desired end. It provides us with a viable categorical norm without any concept of transcendence.

Transcendental normativity generates norms that do not and cannot take account of their own deterritorialization or lines of flight. Because the norms follow from, and so are justified by, the transcendental ground, they cannot provide self-reflexive criteria by which to question themselves, critique themselves, or otherwise act upon themselves. The concept of normativity as deterritorialization, on the contrary, does not generate norms. Rather, it stipulates that “what ‘must’ always remain normative is the ability to critique and transform existing norms, that is, to create something new. . . . One cannot have preexisting norms or criteria for the new; otherwise it would not be new, but already foreseen.”⁷⁰ Absolute deterritorialization is therefore categorical, insofar as it applies to every possible norm as such, but it is not transcendental; rather, it is immanent to whatever norms (and, by extension, assemblages) constitute it. (There can be no deterritorialization without a specific assemblage; thus normativity of deterritorialization both constitutes and is constituted by the particular norms/assemblages to which it applies.)

Considered as such, normativity as deterritorialization is ultimately a kind of “pragmatic” normativity. It determines what norms ought or ought not to be adopted in concrete social formations according to a pragmatic consideration—namely, whether the norm adopted is capable of being critiqued and transformed. This further entails that a norm cannot be adopted if it prevents other norms from being critiqued and transformed. We might say, then, that for Deleuze a norm must (a) be self-reflexive and (b) its adoption must not inhibit the self-reflexivity of norms. Because normativity is a process that constitutes and is constituted by other processes, it is dynamic, and to this extent we should occasionally expect norms to become perverted or otherwise outlive their usefulness. Pragmatic normativity provides a meta-norm that is produced by the adoption of contingent norms but stands above them as a kind of sentinel; to this

extent it is categorical without being transcendent.

Such a view of normativity, while interesting and promising, is not without its problems. Among other things, it does not specify when it is advisable or acceptable to critique or transform particular norms; rather, it only stipulates that any norm must in principle be open to critique and transformation. For example, suppose I belong to a society that adopts vegetarianism as a norm. The adoption of this norm obviously precludes other norms, such as carnivorousness. Is this a reason to reject it? Not necessarily. As long as we remain open to other possibilities, the norm is at least *prima facie* justified. But this by itself does not explain (a) what reasons we may have to adopt a vegetarian rather than a carnivorous norm in the first place; and (b) what reasons we may have to ultimately reject a vegetarian norm in favor of some other norm. Such an explanation would require a theory of value—that is, an axiological criterion that determines what things are worth promoting/discouraging vis-à-vis the adoption of normative principles.

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As Spinoza noted, the alternative to morality (and, by extension, normativity) is ethics—i.e., the study of value and the good life. The Deleuzian distinction between “life-affirming” and “life-denying” practices, not to speak of related concepts such as Foucault’s “care of the self,” are replete with ethical content. It is clear, after all, at least implicitly, that pursuing “life-affirming” practices (or engaging in the “care of the self”) are in some sense “valuable” or constitutive of a “good life.” The question, of course, is how Deleuze would go about defining “value” or “the good life.”

We already know that ethics is to be distinguished from morality on the basis of its concreteness, particularity, and interiority to life itself. Rather than posing universal codes of conduct grounded in abstract concepts like “rationality,” ethics is instead concerned with the myriad ways in which lives can be led. To this extent, the traditional notion that ethics is concerned with values rather than norms is not entirely unfitting. Clearly values can be and often are universalized and rendered transcendent, as in the case of natural law theory. Even the Greeks, for whom value was a function of

particular standards of excellence proper to particular things, believed that such standards were uniform for all human beings.

For Deleuze, however, every human being is the product of a unique and complicated multiplicity of forces, including the inward-directed forces of self-creation. Thus their highest value, as we have seen, is life—the capacity of the social individual (and the society of freely associated individuals) to be different, to change, move, transform, and create. To value something, to treat it as good, is to treat it as something “we ought to welcome, [to] rejoice in if it exists, [to] seek to produce if does not exist . . . to approve its attainment, count its loss a deprivation, hope for and not dread its coming if this is likely, [and] avoid what hinders its production.”⁷¹ There is no doubt that Deleuze values life in this way. On the other hand, I am not sure whether he would regard it as “intrinsically valuable,” if by this is meant that the value of life obtains independently of its relations to other things, or that life is somehow worthy of being valued on its own account, etc. For Deleuze, after all, it would not make sense to speak of life in this way, since by its very nature life is relational and dynamic. There is no doubt, however, that he believes life is worthy of being protected, pursued, promoted.

Deleuze’s valorization of “difference” and scorn of “representation” surely hint at, if they do not altogether reveal, a similarly vitalistic theory of value. Time and again Deleuze, like Nietzsche, emphasizes the importance of loving and affirming life. It is likewise clear that this *Leben-liebe* is both a condition and a consequence of creativity, experimentation, the pursuit of the new and the different. To the extent that representation and its social incarnations are opposed to life, they are condemnable, marked by “indignity.” This strongly suggests that for Deleuze, again, life is lovable, valuable, and good; that it is worthy of being protected and promoted; that whatever is contrary to it is worthy of disapprobation and opposition. At the same time, however, we must recall that the life of which he speaks is something virtual, and there is no guarantee that its actualizations will be affirmative and active. Of course, this is simply one more reason why Deleuze emphasizes experimentation, on the one hand, and eternal vigilance, on

the other. Our experiments may lead to positive transformations, they may lead to madness, they may lead to death. What starts out as a reckless and beautiful affirmation of life can become a death camp. It is not enough, therefore, to experiment and create; one must be mindful of, and responsible for, one's creations. The process requires an eternal revolution against life-denial wherever and however it arises – eternal because without a *telos*, and without a *telos* because life-denial as such can never be completely stopped. It can only be contained or, better, outrun. Whatever goodness is created along the way, Deleuze thinks, will always be provisional, tentative, and contingent, but this is hardly a reason not to create it.

Deleuzian ethics, then, aspires to be an eternal revolution against representation which is itself an eternal process of creation and transformation, an eternal practice of freedom. The good or ethical life is both a goal as well as the infinite network of possibilities we travel in its pursuit. Ethics traces the multiple locations at which means and ends overlap or blur together, the multiple sites at which our desires become immanent to their concrete actualizations, the multiple spaces within which the concrete realizations of our desire become immanent to those desires. For Deleuze, such sites and spaces are constantly shifting into and out of focus, moving into and out of existence. Concrete moral and political goals sought as an end are constituted by our seeking them. Thus the process of seeking freedom or justice is a process of eternal movement, change, becoming, possibility, and novelty which simultaneously demands eternal vigilance, and endurance. There is neither certainty nor respite at any point. There are no stable identities, no transcendent truths, no representations or images. There are only the variable, reciprocal, and immanent processes of creation and possibility themselves.

Deleuze thinks every human being is the product of a unique and complicated multiplicity of forces. Consequently only individuals are in a position to discover, through processes of experimentation, what is valuable in their lives, what they ought to pursue and avoid, etc., in a particular set of circumstances. Only through the process of pursuing alternative practices can one begin to discover the manifold possibilities of life. Deleuze's explicit rejects the idea that there is any sort of "natural" hierarchy of values among individuals. As he notes time and again in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, the authority of oppressive assemblages is always justified by assuming that certain peoples' values are, in some sense, weightier than those of others, and it is precisely the function of normativity to conceal the arbitrary and artificial nature of this assumption under the guise of universalizability and transcendence.

The process of creating value therefore requires an eternal revolution against the forces of repression wherever and however they arise. It lacks any kind of *telos* or end goal, since there is always a microfascism lurking at the heart of every system of personal value-construction which can, and often will, reterritorialize and overcode that system. Again, such a microfascism is every bit as instrumental in producing value as, say, the desire for freedom. It is not the case, therefore, that we ought to oppose what is anti-life, but rather that we must if we are to ever achieve value at all. The fact that the discovery of value is always provisional, tentative, and contingent is hardly a reason not to pursue it. In the end, there may be no ultimate means by which to distinguish one way of living from another, but it is precisely our inability to secure such a means which necessitates an ongoing commitment to ethical life.

ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, Plato, *The Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube and C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 433a-c; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. L. Ackrill et al. (New York: Oxford University, 1998), esp. Book V.
2. Unlike his longtime friend and collaborator Felix Guattari, who had been involved in radical activism since the early 1960s, Deleuze did not become politically active until after 1968. "From this period onward," writes Paul Patton, "he became involved with a variety of groups and causes, including the *Groupe*

- d'Information sur les Prisons* (GIP) begun by Foucault and others in 1972." *Deleuze and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4. More importantly, Deleuze's prior commitment to speculative metaphysics gave way to a deep interest in political philosophy as he attempted to make sense of the political practices he encountered in 1968.
3. Christine Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8–9. For further reading on normativity in general see E. Sosa and E. Villanueva, *Normativity* (London: Blackwell, 2005); J. Gert et al, *Brute Rationality: Normativity and Human Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); J. Dancy, *Normativity* (London: Blackwell, 2000); S. Kagan, *Normative Ethics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).
 4. Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 8–9.
 5. *Ibid.*, 1–4. For more on this distinction see especially R. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); A. McIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1997); M. Slote and R. Crisp, *Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
 6. Todd May, *Gilles Deleuze: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4.
 7. *Ibid.*, 4.
 8. Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 2.
 9. May, *Gilles Deleuze*, 4.
 10. Hence the development in the Middle Ages of casuistry—the systematic application of general moral principles to concrete moral cases—which remained the dominant form of moral reasoning in the West until at least the Renaissance. See, for example, Raymund of Pennafort, *Summa de Poenitentia et Matrimonia* (c. 1235); Bartholomew of San Concordio, *Summa Pisana* (c. 1317); Sylvester Prierias (d. 1523), *Summa Summarum*; St. Antoninus of Florence (d. 1459), *Summa Confessionalis* and *Summa Confessorum*. For more on the history of medieval casuistry see A. J. Celano, *From Priam to the Good Thief: The Significance of a Single Event in Greek Ethics and Medieval Moral Teaching*, The Etienne Gilson Series 23, Studies in Medieval Moral Teaching 3 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies Press, 2000).
 11. Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 4.
 12. This is the context in which St. Thomas Aquinas formulates his natural law theory in *Summa Theologiae* I-II (Q. xc-cviii).
 13. May, *Gilles Deleuze*, 5. As May notes, both developments pave the way for modern liberal democratic theory.
 14. *Ibid.*
 15. *Ibid.*
 16. *Ibid.*, 118.
 17. L. Call, *Postmodern Anarchism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), 2.
 18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1988), Prologue, section 2; *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books), section 125.
 19. See for example Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), esp. section 3; *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, esp. “On the Old and New Tablets” and “On Self Overcoming”; *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), esp. essays 2, sections 11–20.
 20. May, *Gilles Deleuze*, 6–7.
 21. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. M. Joughin (New York: Zone, 1990), 226.
 22. Call, 13–14.
 23. May, *Gilles Deleuze*, 3.
 24. *Ibid.*, 117.
 25. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 36–40.
 26. Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, 16.
 27. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 147.
 28. For more on the temporality of substance, see G. Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam (New York: Zone, 1988).
 29. See May, *Gilles Deleuze*, 26–71.
 30. Daniel Smith, “Deleuze and the Liberal Tradition: Normativity, Freedom, and Judgment.” *Economy and Society* 32 (May 2003): 307.
 31. Some philosophers claim that an action is rational if and only if it satisfies a *rational* desire. This is an ongoing debate within contemporary analytic moral philosophy which I shall not discuss here.
 32. Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 50.
 33. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 55–56.
 34. Jacques Derrida articulates a similar view; the difference is that for him this fluidity is a feature of language rather than a feature of reality itself.
 35. See Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. M. Lester and C. Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).
 36. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1972], trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem, and H. R. Lane (New York: Viking Press, 1977); *A Thousand Plateaus* [1980], trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Though we ought not to underestimate Guattari's contributions to this and later

- works in political philosophy, I will only refer to Deleuze in the present essay for purposes of clarity and convenience.
37. May, *Gilles Deleuze*, 120.
 38. *Ibid.*, 119–20.
 39. Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 56; cf. *Anti-Oedipus*, 1.
 40. May, *Gilles Deleuze*, p. 123.
 41. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 1.
 42. May, *Gilles Deleuze*, p. 125.
 43. Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. S. Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
 44. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 29.
 45. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 59.
 46. *Ibid.*, 66, 33.
 47. *Ibid.*, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 66.
 48. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. D. Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 60; cf. Gilles Deleuze & C. Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and B. Haberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 133.
 49. Todd May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 71.
 50. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 135.
 51. Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, 102, 218.
 52. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, xiii.
 53. May, *Poststructuralist Anarchism*, 11, 47–66.
 54. *Ibid.*, 11.
 55. *Ibid.*, 121–27.
 56. *Ibid.*, 127.
 57. *Ibid.*
 58. *Ibid.*, 128.
 59. *Ibid.*, 130.
 60. *Ibid.*, 133.
 61. *Ibid.*, 134.
 62. Patton, *Deleuze and the Political*, 9.
 63. *Ibid.*, 106.
 64. Smith, “Deleuze and the Liberal Tradition,” 308.
 65. Todd May, *The Moral Theory of Poststructuralism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1995).
 66. *Ibid.*, 48.
 67. *Ibid.*, chapter 3.
 68. *Ibid.*, 87.
 69. *Ibid.*, 88.
 70. Smith, “Deleuze and the Liberal Tradition,” 308.
 71. A. C. Ewing, *The Definition of Good* (London: Macmillan, 1947), 149.

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