Disrupting Philosophical Boundaries: Gilles Deleuze on David Hume

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Famously, Michel Foucault said in 1970 that one day this would be a Deleuzian century.¹ A recent film, *A Thousand Gilles* by Ijobrand Van Veelen (1997), suggests that Gilles Deleuze (1930-1995), may be having an impact of some kind after all. Van Veelen filmed a number of contemporary Deleuzian practitioners: these included people who were designing radically different kinds of architectural space; to those who were involved in the production of heterogeneous new musical structures; through to mass produced ‘custom-made’ furniture, and even to new forms of corporate organizational theory. *A Thousand Gilles* gave the impression that no corner of life was safe from Deleuzian thought. In an active academic and political career which stretched over nearly four decades Gilles Deleuze persistently developed a number of concepts which were to become central to French poststructuralism. For poststructuralist enthusiasts concepts such as assemblage (*agencement*), multiplicity, Becoming, and the Rhizome appeared to represent the best of poststructuralism, and for its implacable foes these ideas typify the kind of philosophical excesses expected of French theory. What might surprise some English-speaking observers however, is that this initial post-structuralist impulse, or excess, depending on your point of view, emerged from Deleuze’s inventive and idiosyncratic reading of Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*,² often considered the ‘father’ of analytic philosophy. In this short paper I will not attempt to assess either the ultimate validity of Deleuze’s poststructuralism, or even his reading of Hume, but rather I will limit myself to a mildly sympathetic airing of what Deleuze appeared to find in Hume.³ One conclusion I will draw from this is that Hume’s philosophical relevance to poststructuralists and postmodernists may have been underestimated, if Deleuze is to be believed, rather than overstated because Hume himself appeared to also move towards something like a poststructuralist practice.

I

Peter S. Fosl noted in *Hume Studies* in 1998 that there has been a growing interpretative movement towards a more humanist Hume over the last two or three decades.⁴ Fosl suggested in his summary that a “rising group of commentators” such as Gilles Deleuze, Yves Michaud, Nicholas Capaldi, Donald T. Siebert, Annette Baier, and Adam Potkay have been concerned with Hume’s thinking on language, culture, morality, eloquence, and social dynamics, and not just Hume’s thoughts on epistemology. Poststructuralist ideas are central to postmodernism, of course, and with regard to this latter doctrine Zuzana Parusnikova noted in a

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paper published in *Hume Studies* in 1993, that some aspects of Hume’s thought had a natural affinity with certain elements of contemporary postmodern philosophy. Parusnikova noted a family resemblance with postmodernism because that movement (or anti-movement) rejected clarity, unity, logos, reason, progress, hierarchy, stability, centralism and teleology. Hume’s radical anti-foundationalism, Parusnikova suggested, had much in common with these rejections and refusals. Hume reported that while writing the *Treatise* he was seized by a desire not to submit to any authority, a youthful rebellion which certainly captured something of what some postmodernist philosophers have suggested they are about today. Postmodernism, for example, is often characterized as iconoclastic, nihilistic, subjectivist, amoral, fragmentary, arbitrary, defeatist and wilful. In Hume’s own time and shortly thereafter, contemporary responses, or characterizations of his own work held that he was guilty of egregious philosophical infidelity, ratiocination, paganism, self-love, absurdism, and finally most damaging of all, that he was an atheist. The vocabulary might be very different, but taken together these associated adjectives might well add up to much the same effect. Hume, like later postmodernists, was a cultural and philosophical iconoclast who assailed all of the most cherished beliefs of the day concerning knowledge, religion, the self, and the dominant social mores of his time.

According to Parusnikova the core argument of anti-foundationalist philosophy is to be found in the attitude taken towards a theory of meaning. While structuralists held that meaning is never present in the sign, but is dispersed within a greater multiplicity of signs, (she mentions Sassure in particular), this in turn suggests that meaning is not determined by its referents. Thus it is argued, that the meaning of a sign is often constituted by what is precisely not present, but within a structure of delimiting differences between one sign and another. The relative stability of Sassure’s structuralist system of signs is breached by anti-foundationalism when the governing conventions which neatly tie it all-together are challenged by random elements, creativity and the unexpected.

For poststructuralists the differences between systems becomes much more significant than the underlying grammatical similarities between the structures of all languages. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), is a classic example of post-structuralist theory of the anti-foundationalist stamp. *Anti-Oedipus* exposed the authoritarianism inherent in psychoanalysis which attempted to reveal Oedipal desires, but which in effect only succeeded in suppressing those same desires. In *Anti-Oedipus* individuals are ‘desiring mechanisms’ who lack the sense of unity and individual identity imposed upon them by Freudian rationalism. Parusnikova concedes that Hume, on first glance, does not appear to fit the bill as an anti-foundationalist or post-structuralist of this type. For Hume the problem of philosophy appears to be empirical, not textual or linguistic for example. Hume’s critique of metaphysics is also insufficiently thorough to include him in the postmodern pantheon. On the other hand, writes Parusnikova, Hume’s refusal to chart an easy course out of skepticism, or offer any neat philosophical ‘package’ surely guarantees his entry to the club.

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5 “Against the Spirit of Foundations: Postmodernism and David Hume,” *Hume Studies,* vol. 19, no 1, April 1993. Also see “Hume and Derrida on Language and Meaning,” by Fred Wilson, *Hume Studies,* Vol 13, no 2, 1986, p105, where he said “Derrida has been preceded by Hume...”, with reference to the anti-Platonic character of Hume’s theory of meaning.
This notion of Hume as an anti-foundationalist is controversial, a fact that Parusnikova herself clearly recognizes, since great piles of Hume scholarship have been devoted to squaring the circle between Hume’s conception of reason and human nature by presenting him as a mitigated sceptic writing from within a system of spontaneous naturalism, and all of that is often achieved by allowing for a few loose ends, and even the odd philosophical howler of one kind or another. Following a survey of Donald Livingstone’s more sophisticated attempt to submerge Hume’s scepticism and naturalism in a kind of phenomenology of common life, Parusnikova then turns to Hume’s obvious attraction to politics, economics, and history as providing further evidence that he ultimately held that philosophy could not serve as a positive theoretical foundation of those disciplines, she calls this Hume’s ‘rejection of philosophy as a basis for politics’.

Deleuze also finds evidence of this in Hume in the course of his discussion of “purposivness”, or the coming together of “intentional finality and nature.” Although Hume attempts to justify the universal validity and acceptance of certain rules for utilitarian reasons, says Perusnikova, he does not support this position by any appeal to normative principles or any metaphysical teleology. Thus in Hume’s philosophy it becomes “easy to cross the borderline between utilitarian (empirical) universalism and the postmodern tolerance of incompatibility.”

I take Perusnikova to mean epistemological incompatibility here, what Deleuze also speaks of when he characterizes Hume by saying that for Hume, “Philosophy must constitute itself as the theory of what we are doing, not as a theory of what there is”.

II

Interesting though this Hume as a kind of Jean-François Lyotard type liberal is (sic J. S. Mill), this thesis was ‘radicalized’ further by Gilles Deleuze back in 1953. Parusnikova did not cite Deleuze’s book on Hume in her 1993 paper, and I have no idea if that was because she was not aware of it, or if she excluded it for other reasons. Parusnikova may have wanted to confine her discussion only to the specific question of Hume and postmodernism for reasons of brevity and space. In any case, for Deleuze the profound disruption in Hume’s ‘anti-system’ system is not between reason and human nature (scepticism and naturalism), but between human nature and nature, or between what Deleuze called the collection of ideas and the association of ideas, or the rule of nature and the rule of representations. Hume’s naturalism, according to Deleuze, provided the basis for operating principles without any kind of postulation of apriori structures or categories of experience. Deleuze saw ‘associationism’ in Hume, e.g., meaning that together with belief and the externality of relations, the human imagination could create a new unity, which in turn could be put to good use with regard to other ideas, which that first unity once resembled. The mind, in this sense, resembles a system or network of tendencies. In a real sense Deleuze took Hume’s ‘bundle theory of the self’ to refer not to the work of instances of perceptions, ticking like a reel of film in a movie projector, but something like an

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6 Parusnikova, 11.
7 Deleuze, ES, 133.
8 Parusnikova, 14.
9 Deleuze, ES, 109.
enormously complex mental thesaurus. According to this Deleuzian
formulae Hume’s anti-foundationalist subjectivity is an excellent
example of the de-centered poststructuralist self. Deleuze said the
following, for example, “Our entire problem [of empiricism]
depends on this, since the impressions of sensation only form the
mind, giving it merely an origin, whereas the impressions of
reflection constitute the subject of the mind.”\(^{10}\)

If one thinks along these Deleuzian ‘Hume as anti-
foundationalist’ lines (an unresolved Hume), and of Hume as
providing the basis for a less coherent paradoxical subjectivity, then
it does not appear to be a million miles from the Deleuzian social
practice I mentioned in my introduction; mass-produced furniture
which can never-the-less be made customized to order, Rhizomatic
furnishings which appear to be almost organically interconnected.
Nor does it appear to be a huge conceptual leap from this
Deleuze/Hume to the design of unstable architectural spaces which
automatically adjust as a result of us moving through them, or to
randomly created heterogeneous musical structures which create
and re-create almost autonomously, and in unexpected directions,
and which in turn support a fragmented Rap DJ culture (especially
via internet MP3, supported, Rhizomes, etc).

The Deleuzian Hume, in other words, is a philosopher of
an imaginative space, not of the senses. Quoting Hume, Deleuze
said the human imagination is like “a play without a stage.”\(^{11}\)
Deleuze pointed out that for Hume the ultimate nature of reality
was always a fiction of the imagination, never an object of the
understanding, as it was for Kant.\(^ {12}\) In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980),
Deleuze placed Hume into a philosophical lineage of thinkers
which included Nietzsche and Bergson because they pointed in the
direction of thought that was non-territorial. This philosophy of the
imagination, rather than the understanding, suggested to Deleuze
that Hume was a sociologist and historian first, before he was in
any sense a psychologist. This thesis was later supported by
Parusnikova, as I mentioned a moment ago. Deleuze appeared to
take this view of Hume as a philosopher of “exteriority and
extension” because he tried to find a way to make the passions sociable, and interest social.\(^ {13}\) Indeed, Deleuze argued it is the latter
which make the former possible (former being the understanding).
Like Parusnikova, as for Deleuze, the postmodern anti-
foundationalist Hume “is above all a moralist, a political thinker,
and a historian.”\(^ {14}\) Reason, said Hume, has nothing to do with the
choice of moral ends.\(^ {15}\)

Deleuze also appeared to find a proto-poststructuralist
attitude to specific phenomena in Hume’s thought which were to
become increasingly important to Deleuze himself over the years.
As well as a kind of Humean de-centered Self, Deleuze suggested
that Hume had a fragmented and open approach to economics,
property, religion, and difference, which was not typical of his
milieu. Turning to Hume’s critique of Hobbes, Deleuze pointed out
that whereas Hobbes presented us with a complete self-contained
ego as subject, Hume took the view that “human beings are much

\(^{10}\) Deleuze, ES, 97.
\(^{11}\) Hume, T.1.4.6.4.
\(^{12}\) Deleuze, ES, 75.
\(^{13}\) Ibid, ES, 22.
\(^{14}\) Ibid, ES, 33.
\(^{15}\) Hume, T, 2.3.3.6.
less egoistic than they are partial.” Further, Deleuze extended this analysis into Hume’s economic theory as well, and said: “nothing is further from the *homo economicus* than Hume’s analysis.” Egoism only posited the principle of identity, said Deleuze, an A=A. There was no Hobbesian account of sympathy, for example, as there was in the case of Hume. Hume, on the other hand, added many motivations to interest which remained unheeded by Hobbes, such as “prodigality, ignorance, heredity, custom, habit,” and quoting Hume again he included the “spirit of greed and endeavour, of luxury and abundance.” As far as property was concerned the rationalized Enlightenment natural law theory of property is quite ambiguously dealt with by Hume, as it was later by Smith in his lectures on jurisprudence. Deleuze quoted from the *Treatise* where Hume discussed the ownership of the abandoned city, is it owned by the warrior who throws the javelin at the gate? Hume said “for my part I find the dispute impossible to be decided.” Deleuze, therefore, moved beyond Parusnikova’s more tentative thesis concerning Hume’s anti-foundationalist method and towards something like poststructuralist practice, since he is also arguing that Hume’s analysis of unstable ego-interest, economic activity and property rights also remain unstable and uncertain. In other words, according to Deleuze, Hume’s *Treatise* goes beyond method to include doctrine. Deleuze gives as a classic example of Hume’s poststructuralist ‘associationism’ during the course of his interesting intervention in the free seas debate. How are we to explain why the great oceans remain outside the possession of peoples and nations while “friths and bays” belong to owners of the surrounding lands? The reason says Hume lies in the construction of the imaginative elements, a “union in the fancy, and being at the same time inferior, they are of course regarded as an accession.” Thus we see in Hume’s suggestion the breakdown of an important Enlightenment binarism between possession and property.

III

Deleuze’s most famous, or perhaps notoriously novel poststructuralist concept is undoubtedly the Rhizome, which I mentioned a moment ago. And in this early 1953 study of Hume we can see the basic shape of that concept begin to emerge for Deleuze from his examination of Hume’s analysis of religion. The Rhizome is analogous to certain non-hierarchical structures of the natural world, such as mosses and tubers, and the key characteristic of this structure is that any point of the structure can be connected to any other. In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the hierarchical structures of Western countries resemble ‘arboreal’ structures such as roots and trees. According to Deleuze, Rhizomes are non-authoritarian flexible patterns that should be favoured by Western societies over the kind of hierarchical systems which currently dominate. An example of a Deleuzian Rhizome which is often cited in the literature is the internet, which allows for new connections on any part of the system and which has no clearly identifiable center.

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16 Deleuze, ES, 38.
17 Ibid, 45.
18 Ibid, 45.
19 Hume, T.3.2.3.7.
20 See Fosl, Peter S. 1998, p363, where Fosl criticizes Livingston for fetishizing Hume’s conservatism beyond what Hume’s texts will author, especially with regard to property.
21 Ibid, T.3.2.11 note.
Returning to Hume, Deleuze pointed out that he was an early critic of the defence of proofs of God’s existence which were based on arguments by analogy. Such arguments, said Hume, confused the general with the accidental. Why take human technical activity as the basis of this analogy, rather than some other kind of affair, such as generation or vegetation. Or, as Hume himself was to ask, “why can’t an orderly system not be spun from the belly as from the brain”…, thus Hume’s associationist philosophy is first a physiological phenomenon. Obviously physiology turns upon the body, thus upon the unique, and upon difference, and the indivisible. Hume gave the example of a “grain of sand” to demonstrate his point e.g., nothing can be smaller than we can sense, and the mind therefore has a finite capacity. Deleuze doesn’t really develop his Humean empiricism as difference theory in *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, but he returned to the themes of the body and difference in his later studies of Nietzsche and Spinoza.

One last element in the poststructuralist lexicon is worth mentioning, the term assemblage. Assemblage referred to the multiplicity of desire over that of power as a basic organizing principle, e.g., in the case of Deleuze this was a part of his somewhat mild criticism of Foucault. Deleuze and Guattari posited multiple flows of desire, assemblies of organic and inorganic phenomena, human and natural, and the discursive and the social which were all contingent and changing unities. These ‘unities’ are in turn constantly breaking down as there boundaries are breached. Desire has a tendency to overreach itself, or ‘deteritorialize’, in Deleuzean jargon. This vitalistic materialism certainly owes much to Spinoza, but there is a sense in which Deleuze indicates that the ground was also prepared by Hume.

Finally, in a debunking of the grand ambition of Western philosophy which is typical of postmodernism from Rorty to Derrida, Deleuze suggests that a philosophical theory is nothing other than an elaborately developed question. According to Deleuze, Kant, for example, who claimed that “knowledge not only begins with experience but is derived from it, is “in no way Satisfactory” since knowledge is not the most important thing for empiricism but “only the means to some practical activity.” The collection of distinct perceptions called empirical knowledge, according to Deleuze, would be little without the natural principles of association which together constitute a subject (contiguity, resemblance, and causality). Deleuze quotes approvingly from Hume, in turn quoting Machiavelli concerning the ability of some people to match their energy and temper to the challenge of the time. The fact is, said Deleuze, “that associationism is the theory of all that is practice, action, morality, and the law.”

**Conclusion**

Deleuze presented us with a portrait of Hume which anticipated many of the themes and practices of poststructuralism, and with a thinker of politics without philosophical foundations. For Deleuze, Hume was a philosopher of being and becoming and not primarily a philosopher of knowledge. According to Deleuze,

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22 Deleuze, ES, 89, and Hume, T.1.2.5.20.
23 Hume, T.1.2.1.2.
24 Deleuze, ES, 108.
Hume united human nature and nature in theory of purposiveness which was based upon the unstable subjectivities of associationism. Empiricism for Deleuze was not a collection of perceptions but a series of imaginings with a kind of dreamlike quality. The human mind is like a string instrument in which, unlike wind instruments, reverberation continues for a long time, he said. Of course Deleuze was gnomic and difficult to read, and then one must take into consideration the vagaries of translation, and the French idiom of the period. Never the less, I think it is possible to grasp some of the fertility of his thinking concerning Hume: the random elements, unexpected events and subjectivities of the natural and of human nature which challenge the structuralism of the sign. Deleuze’s notion of associationism, where imaginative replacement of the infinite inclusivity of nature stymies thought and action has echoes in Hume. Added to Perusnikova’s postmodern incompatibility of knowledge one might like to add Deleuze’s incomprehensible ‘nature’ or Hume’s notion of “extension”. Opposed to the centered ego of modernity, characteristic of Hobbes, Hume/Deleuze proposed an instability of desires, motivations, and taken-for-granted concepts that depend on a stable ego, such as markets, property and so forth. And finally in a move which attempted to shake off mechanical metaphors, Deleuze proposed, following Hume, to return to organic systems of organization which might serve as more practical and liberating for purposive physical beings. Thus the contemporary poststructuralist experimentation with design, architecture, sound, and space may plausibly be said to have some affinity with certain aspects of David Hume’s philosophy.