

Deleuze's Hume . . . and Ours

Madness, Retrieval

Introduction

More than a half-century has passed since the appearance of Gilles Deleuze's *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature* (1953), one of the very few works that provide a rich vein for Continental philosophy. Its way of approach to Hume is unique and fruitful. The insights yielded from it are both startling and well grounded. It removes Hume from the standard empiricist-naturalist scope of interpretation. Finally, Deleuze provides the necessary seeding for Hume's reentry as an untapped resource for Continental philosophy.¹ Concentrating on what Deleuze has called "the contradiction between imagination and reflection" as a guide, I will attempt to retrieve elements of Hume in order to introduce this book.

Here I join the tradition of philosophers who are "scandalized" by various shortcomings of those who fall short of their hopes and expectations: I am scandalized . . . nay, outraged . . . nay, rendered apoplectic by the marginalization of Hume in the living history of Continental thought. After all, it was no British empiricist but *Kant* who first saw and most acutely felt the power of Humean thought. His appreciation of its radicalism led him to extend its epistemological challenge to the concept of cause to the entirety of metaphysics, both general and special. Moses Mendelssohn reputedly referred to Kant as "the all-destroyer," although the Ideas of reason—freedom, God, and immortality—are relocated in the realm that has "primacy," the practical realm. With that in mind, one quakes at the epithet Mendelssohn might have ascribed to the unapologetically cheerful Scottish skeptic and (at least in the Judeo-Christian sense)² atheist.

I contend that contrary to appearances, matters stand otherwise with the undoubtedly great minds of German Idealism. Neither Fichte, nor Hölderlin,

nor Schelling, nor Hegel had much to say about Hume (although the latter included him as a moment in philosophy's self-unfolding). We cannot, of course, say with any certainty why this is so; our only recourse is to a kind of punditry, that is, it might be the result of a feeling of German philosophical exceptionalism, and/or of the irresistibly seductive openings provided by Kant's thought, and/or of a certain carelessness to which we are all given over, and/or of a certain carefreeness that gave wing to their thought. This much, however, is undeniable: without Hume, there would have been no critical philosophy of Kant. Thus, Hume's thought is the subsoil of German Idealism—if not more.

Hence, the virtual concession of Hume's thought to Anglo-American philosophy is not only unnecessary, but has deprived philosophy of a valuable and striking now-subterranean source. Deleuze has provided great service in unearthing it.

I. Deleuze: Hume in Motion

Hume famously asserts that reason is passive. In Deleuze's account of Hume, this means that reason becomes a feeling—one might say, another feeling belonging to the stream of impressions and ideas. The mind functions as the site of reflection, through which impressions are rendered both less vivid and suitable for their association into the three groupings of resemblance, contiguity, and causality. The key faculty for Deleuze is a fecund imagination that, I will later suggest, drives the Humean text beyond itself from within it.

We can now see the special ground of empiricism: nothing in the mind transcends human nature, because it is human nature that, in its principles, transcends the mind; nothing is ever transcendental. Association, far from being a product, is a rule of the imagination and a manifestation of its free exercise. It guides the imagination, gives it uniformity, and also constrains it. In this sense, ideas are connected *in* the mind, not *by* the mind.³

Note how this differs from even the best doctrinal accounts of Hume. *The Cambridge Companion to Hume* offers a thoughtful appraisal of Hume in which the collected essays are unified by the vision of its astute editor, David Fate Norton. According to Norton, Hume is “the first post-sceptical philosopher of the early modern period,”⁴ who sought and located a path between extreme skepticism and overconfident rationalism. References to the role of imagination occur in this worthy volume, as do the suitable modesty of epistemological

claims in general. By contrast, Deleuze encounters a dynamic text, in which internal clashes are intrinsic to its subject matter. This is why the modifier “special ground” belongs to his characterization of Hume’s empiricism.

Human nature is thought problematically. It is comprised of all sorts of tensions: between things and relations, between imagination and reason, between passions and ideas, between speculation and practice. The “special ground” is a ground that is always shifting. In this light, I credit Deleuze with discovering what I will call *kinetic* empiricism in Hume. His interpretation in *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature* seems to move inexorably toward practice rather than theory; his penultimate sentence reads: “Philosophy must constitute itself as the theory of what we are doing, not as a theory of what there is.”⁵ Nevertheless, his observations within the realm of theory stand on their own.

In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume writes:

Nothing is more free than the imagination of man; and though it cannot exceed that original stock of ideas furnished by the internal and external senses, it has unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing these ideas, in all the varieties of fiction and vision. (*EHU*, 47)

Like no other interpreter to my knowledge, Deleuze ascribes the origin of the threefold principle of the association of ideas—as seen above—to the *free exercise of imagination* itself. This is an example of a philosophical observation that has remained hidden in plain sight: reason is passive; so, too is sensation. If only by default (and not only by default!) imagination is solely endowed with the *power* to act, which here means to mix ideas, to compound, separate, and divide them. Imagination, which exceeds the mind (reason), belongs to human nature as its vital, internally conflicted special ground.

To imagination’s unlimited power, Hume ascribes two results: *fictions* and *visions*. Since Deleuze concentrates so heavily on fictions, as I will soon show, how are visions to be distinguished from them? This distinction is hardly easy to discern. The word is little or no help, as *any* sense of “vision” can be interpreted as overlapping with “fiction,” especially in Hume’s philosophy. There can only be a sliding difference between them, in accord with the way belief is differentiated from fiction only by virtue of the customary conjunction between two objects. Thus, if at any given time we experience once again the conjunction between fire and heat, we *believe* their connection; while at the same given time, if we experience a conjunction between that same fire and the Schubert *Lied* or the Redd Foxx standup routine to which we are listening,

the conjunction is fictional, that is to say, there is no such connection and thus no such belief.

II. Deleuze's Hume and Madness

The trope of madness occurs in the crucial Section IV of the first *Enquiry* titled "Sceptical Doubts Concerning the Operations of the Understanding":

And though none but a fool or madman will ever pretend to dispute the authority of experience, or to reject that great guide of human life, it may surely be allowed a philosopher to have so much curiosity at least as to examine the principle of human nature, which gives this mighty authority to experience . . . (*EHU*, 36)

This particular "philosophical examination" exposes the rational groundlessness—in other words, the irrationality—of the "principle of human nature" in question, namely the principle of causality. As is too well known to require rehearsing the argument, this "principle" is no more and no less than the customary transition in the imagination from one object to its usual attendant, a transition that is felt in the mind. It is an instinct, and not a valid inference.

Can an assured inference be drawn from this result? Indeed it can: the curious philosopher finds herself located in the region of madness and/or folly, or rather on the nether side of both. Philosophy proves here to be an entry into madness, rather than a respite from it. Hume's famous recourse to practical life is no philosophical response strictly speaking, but rather—at least in the first *Enquiry*—an escape from philosophy.

Thus, madness *is* human nature *simpliciter*. Deleuze grasps this outcome with astonishing recognition. He speaks of the "aesthetic game of the imagination and reason,"⁶ which is a game that can yield no winner. Imagination and reason contradict one another; no reconciliation is possible. Hume calls the philosophical system "the monstrous offspring of two principles . . . which are both at once embrac'd by the mind, and which are unable mutually to destroy each another" (*THN*, 215). Deleuze writes:

From the point of view of philosophy, the mind is no longer anything but delirium and madness. There is no complete system, synthesis, or cosmology that is not imaginary. With the belief in the existence of bodies, fiction itself as a principle is opposed to the principles of association: the latter are *principally* instead of be-

ing *subsequently* excessive, as is the case with general rules. Fantasy triumphs. . . . Here, the most insane is still natural. The system is a mad delirium.⁷

That is to say, the relations of resemblance, contiguity, and causality are epistemologically parasitical upon the belief in the existence of bodies—a reading that exposes one of those revelatory textual moments for Continental philosophy in which a text works against itself *productively*. Beginning from the three principles of association, one discovers that the belief in bodies is a fiction; however, the association of ideas presupposes belief in the external existence of bodies insofar as the latter must be regarded as the source of impressions. The argument—if it may properly be called an argument—is not circular: without an anterior belief in bodies, Hume's monstrous empiricism cannot so much as begin.

III. The Situation of Madness

Madness plays a major role in the Platonic dialogues, especially the *Phaedrus* and the *Ion*. In the former, divine madness is the source of the greatest blessings: prophecy, healing from plagues and woes arising from blood guilt, possession by the Muses, and greatest of all *erōs*. The third kind of madness seizes the great poets, as described in the *Ion*, who are quite ordinary when sane and sober. *Erōs* seizes the philosopher. One is tempted to call it philosophy's necessary condition; however, the barest thought of "condition," whether sufficient, necessary, or logical, presupposes *erōs* to some degree. Unlike human madness, which results in lawlessness and harm, divine madness introduces or reintroduces measure (244a–245b).

Modern philosophy, for better and/or for worse, operates virtually if not actually apart from the mythical framework in which Plato and the Presocratics worked. One finds, therefore, nothing corresponding to the division within madness cited above. The chief residue of Greek philosophy animating its modern counterpart is *wonder*, regarded as the origin of philosophy in both Plato and Aristotle, and in the latter as finding its proper completion in knowledge (*epistēmē*). In *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*, Deleuze both excavates and—as if in a *vernissage*—exhibits the most arresting inscription of madness in the modern period.

Can this inscription be superimposed or—perhaps even, as in a palimpsest—discerned beneath its Platonic ancestor? It is difficult to say. Humean madness as disclosed by Deleuze is certainly intrinsic to the philosophical

enterprise, but seems to bear little resemblance to *erōs*, although the “curiosity” of which Hume speaks corresponds closely to the wonder spoken of in the *Theaetetus*, the outcome of which is also Socratic:

The most perfect philosophy of the natural kind only staves off our ignorance a little longer: as perhaps the most perfect philosophy of the moral or metaphysical kind serves only to discover larger portions of it. Thus the observation of human blindness and weakness is the result of all philosophy, and meets us at every turn, in spite of our endeavours to elude or avoid it. (*EHU*, 31)

However, in his praise of the “Academic or Sceptical philosophy,” which insists on caution in judging and exercising due discipline with respect to the limits of human knowledge, one can locate at least a trace of Platonic *erōs*: “Every passion is mortified [by such philosophy], except the love of truth; and that passion never is, nor can be, carried to too high a degree” (*EHU*, 41). Thus, if passion is read as *erōs*, *erōs* and measure are aligned once more. Nowhere else in modern philosophy is this alignment—strongly suggested by Deleuze’s text—so straightforwardly present.

In the last chapters of his book, Deleuze argues in concert with Hume for the ultimately ethical and practical character of the latter’s thought. However, he draws out a consequence that is certainly already implicit in Hume, but that Hume himself did not see. Here is how Deleuze untangles the monstrous contradiction that bedevils the philosophical system:

Madness is human nature related to the mind, just as good sense is the mind related to human nature; each one is the reverse of the other. This is the reason why we must reach the depths of madness and solitude in order to find a passage to good sense. [The domain of general rules and beliefs] is the middle and temperate region, where the contradiction between human nature and the imagination already exists, and always subsists . . . but is regulated by possible corrections and resolved through practice.⁸

Toward the end of Part One of the *Treatise*, Hume playfully gives up the bleak and gloomy result of his theoretical philosophy straightaway for a good dinner, a game of backgammon, and conversation between friends, he joins in the laugh at himself for taking his skepticism so seriously and opts instead for a comment on “the whimsical condition of mankind” (*EHU*, 160) in the first *Enquiry*. However, he never abjures a single one of his theoretical

conclusions. He seems to provide no bridge between the “melancholy” radical ignorance to which his thought consigns him and the superficial pleasures that so quickly relieve this despondency.

Deleuze locates such a bridge but ultimately eschews it in favor of ethics and practice. It is the bridge of madness. The delirium of the philosophical system is precisely what gives impetus to “good sense,” that is, to its temperance, by means of certain general ideas of the mind. If these moderating ideas are absent, then madness occurs in a region where it can become harmful. However, there neither is nor should there be a “remedy” for madness. Such a cure, happily impossible in principle, would end human nature once and for all.

Could it be that Hume is as valuable a living ancestor for Continental philosophy as is Kant, who confined his comments on madness to his *Anthropology* but not to his critical philosophy? Is Hume, as well as being a thinker who prepared the way for the greatest advance in the modern era, also a thinker who comes toward us from the future? Deleuze's early book firmly indicates an affirmative answer to both. Its insistence on a rigorous empiricism that admits nothing transcendental, together with its insistence that all duality emerges from within the flow of impressions and ideas—what we today might call phenomenology—yields a madness that inhabits all of our efforts to question, as it undermines the conventional wisdom that regards Hume as primarily a naturalist. If, as Hume says, nature is stronger than any principle, that is because of the madness residing at the heart of human nature.

How may we think this madness in our contemporary context? In his own context, madness is presented as the outcome of a philosophical system that would unite reason and imagination but cannot. Reversing yet preserving Hume, we may think of philosophical system-building itself as a manifestation of madness, that is, as a creative act so that—in its highest form—a philosophical system can be approached and interpreted as a work of art. Finally, we must not forget the most salient development in this retrieval: that in philosophizing, we find ourselves ecstatically afflicted—like Hume—with folly and madness.