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Making Sense of Problems
Toward a Deleuzo-Humean Critical Theory

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ABSTRACT: In this article I extend Gilles Deleuze's understanding of sense, as developed in *Logic of Sense*, by developing a metaphysics of problems. In doing this, we can appreciate the role Hume's philosophy plays in Deleuze's thought, and most importantly how we can understand sense in the context of making sense of life. With this perspective in place, we compare Deleuze's project with Pierre Bourdieu's and, finally, apply the notion of making sense to the history of the emergence of capitalism. With this discussion of the history of capitalism, we see how Deleuze draws from both Hume and Marx, or, in short, we sketch a Deleuzo-Humean political theory.

KEYWORDS: Gilles Deleuze, Pierre Bourdieu, David Hume, political theory

I

As Deleuze says on numerous occasions, philosophers have never been truly motivated by the "What is *X*?" question; rather, as Deleuze puts it "questions such as who? how much? how? where? when? are better questions,"[1] questions that are integral to the process of encountering a problem,

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a problem that then prompts and shocks us into the effort of making sense. To expand upon what I mean, let us take the case of the jealous lover, as Deleuze does as well in his book on Marcel Proust. Proust was well aware of the pressing questions just mentioned, and the jealous narrator of *The Prisoner* admits that such jealous questioning "always made [him] more open to the world of the possible than to that of real-life contingencies."[2] He then goes on to admit that he would be well served if he could find within himself a "prefect of police" who "reasons logically" and in accordance with the probabilities of one's given situation. Such is not the case, however, for one who is jealous, for rather than confine themselves to the probability and logic of one's situation, they continually go beyond what is given to "all the possibilities between here and the four corners of the universe. . . . Reality," our jealous narrator admits, "is always a mere starting-point towards the unknown, on a path down which we can never travel very far. It is better not to know, to think as little as possible, not to feed jealousy on the smallest concrete detail."[3] Any determinate detail will simply feed and intensify the jealous questioning, the effort of the jealous person to come to terms with the reality that makes sense of their jealousy. Even if the jealous lover were given a determinate, indisputable fact—let us say proof that their partner had indeed cheated with a particular person—then this will only intensify the questioning—how did this occur, where, when, and who else is there? If there was this person, might there be others, and who, when, and in what circumstances did these occur, and so on. With these questions, the jealous person encounters the problematic reality that makes sense of their jealousy, but at the cost of a delirium of ceaseless questions.

We find in Hume a similar awareness of our tendency to move beyond what is given to the "four corners of the universe," to follow the imagination to an infinity of possibilities. This is where delirium enters the scene for Hume. This occurs in relation to Hume's principles of association, principles which naturally lead us to connect one impression and idea with another—namely, these are the principles of resemblance, contiguity, and causation. Over time and through repetition these principles solidify into habit and custom, the result being that we have a more lively expectation and association between some ideas than others. The idea of a mountain and being covered with snow will have more numerous associations and hence result in a more strongly held belief about reality than the idea of a mountain and being made of gold, and thus this will affect in turn what we take to be likely true or false about reality. In cases of delirium and

madness, however, the role that habit and custom play in determining what we are likely to believe comes to be undermined. In particular, what is undermined in madness and delirium is the relation between impressions and ideas, or "the difference betwixt feeling and thinking,"[4] as Hume puts it, the difference between *feeling* one's leg break and *thinking* about the time one broke one's leg. As Hume notes, "in sleep, in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of soul, our ideas may approach to our impressions."[5] The delirium that might befall a jealous lover may well lead them to conclusions that are far beyond being matters of fact, facts justified by the probabilities that come with the principles of association, the probabilities that would be the basis for how Proust's police prefect would think. As Hume puts it, the delusional beliefs of the jealous lover can come to have the same status as those "we formerly dignify'd with the name of conclusion concerning matters of fact."[6] Thus although our thinking usually follows the tried and tested patterns laid down by the principles of association and the customs and habits built upon their repetitive application, there is no guarantee that this will occur and the infinite play of imagination and the threat of delirium is an ever present risk associated with thinking. This is the problem Hume leaves us with, or it is what one might call the problem of Hume.

It is the inseparability of delirium from thinking that is a primary focus of Deleuze's interest in Hume. Of particular importance for Deleuze are passages such as the following where Hume acknowledges "the liberty of the imagination to transpose and change its ideas," to which Hume adds that "The Fables we meet with in poems and romances put this entirely out of question. Nature there is totally confounded, and nothing mentioned but winged horses, fiery dragons, and monstrous giants."[7] In other words, we only need to open a poem, romance, or a Harry Potter book to realize the liberty with which the imagination can combine and change its ideas. As Deleuze takes up this passage he sees the starting point for Hume's project as being one where "Left to itself, the mind has the capacity to move from one idea to another, but it does so at random, in a delirium that runs throughout the universe, creating fire dragons, winged horses, and monstrous giants."[8] As Deleuze reads Hume, this delirium comes to be tamed, or is drawn into habitual patterns by way of the principles of association. The important point to draw from Hume as well as Proust, is that if thinking sets out to think determinate thoughts, thoughts with some determinate, representational or propositional content, then this thinking also involves a

problematic tendency that may well undermine the tendency toward determinate thoughts. To make sense of things thus risks invoking the problems that stop making sense.

II

We can further clarify Deleuze's understanding of the nature of problems by turning to Pierre Bourdieu's work. In particular, Bourdieu uses the concept field in a way that is similar to Deleuze—Deleuze begins his final essay, "Immanence: a life," for instance, with the question, "What is a transcendental field?"[9] For Bourdieu, there is a similarity between the understanding of particles as epiphenomena of various fields (e.g., electromagnetic field) and certain aspects of social life that are themselves "mere epiphenomena," as Bourdieu puts it, of various social fields, such as kinship structures, etc. If one pushes this reading too far, however, one ends up with a structuralist understanding of agency, and Bourdieu sets out to find a place for both agency and social fields. As Bourdieu understands his project, he "wanted, so to speak, to reintroduce the agents that Lévi-Strauss and the structuralists, among others Althusser, tended to abolish, making them into simple epiphenomena of structures."[10] To do this, Bourdieu adds the concept of habitus to the concept of field, thereby avoiding a structuralist determinism on the one hand, and a form of conscious voluntarism or phenomenology on the other—"the notion of habitus," Bourdieu argues, "is meant to exclude [both an appeal to] consciousness and the unconscious . . . [and] explanation by determining causes or by final causes."[11]

With the concept of habitus, the agency of an individual is neither merely an epiphenomenon of social structures nor is it reducible to being a phenomenological aspect of subjective experience; rather, it entails what Bourdieu calls a "feel for the game," whereby an agent's actions are "immediately adjusted to the immanent demands of the game,"[12] and thus their behavior can be seen as being "directed towards certain ends without being consciously directed to these ends, or determined by them."[13] Habitus thus accounts for an agent whose "feel for the game" results in actions that are both irreducible to the social field in which they occur, and hence to the structural rules and laws that might be used in an attempt to model such behaviors, and they are irreducible to the conscious awareness of why we are doing what we are doing when acting, and hence to a phenomenological

account. One does what they do by feel, and yet not everyone is predetermined by the social field to acquire the feel for the game.

We can now return to the nature of problems, or problematic fields to better connect with Bourdieu's work and with Deleuze's late interest in transcendental fields. For Bourdieu what a field makes possible is "a species of capital," or the social capital of knowing "Greek or . . . integral calculus."[14] The feel for the game or habitus that enables one to acquire such "species of capital" places them in an advantageous social position vis-à-vis others. A field is thus, as Bourdieu defines it, "a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions,"[15] such as the relations between those who do and do not have various forms of capital. A problematic field, by contrast, is not a network or configuration of forces but a network or configuration of becomings, of making sense or what Deleuze and Deleuze and Guattari also call incorporeal transformations. The difference here is subtle but significant. First, the process of making sense involves both the tendency toward Humean delirium, toward the delirium that undermines that which makes sense, and it involves the tendency toward the determinate, toward further determining and differentiating *that* which makes sense. Making sense, however, is neither delirium nor determinate; rather, it is a problematic field, a process. Moreover, although a problematic field is the condition for the determinate which arise as solutions, problematic fields are not exhausted by these solutions and are thus not to be confused with determinate, corporeal solutions [hence the use of the term incorporeal]. At the same time, problematic fields are not independent of the solutions they make possible, for they are only discernible with their solutions. A problematic field, in short, is what is presupposed when a determinate entity comes to be or when it becomes something other, and it is an incorporeal transformation, or multiplicity of such transformations, for it is irreducible to any determinate corporeal entity—determinate corporeal entities are epiphenomena of problematic fields. A problematic field is thus not a configuration or network of "objective relations between positions," as Bourdieu understands it, with these taken to be *determinate, individuated* positions that are actual positions within a given field—for example, do you know Greek or not? On this point, problematic fields more closely follow the view of fields found in physics, where they make actual, material particles such as electrons possible. Although these fields are real and inseparable from the particles that emanate from them, they are not composed of actual particles, nor are they to be confused with actual particles, but

instead they consist of virtual particles (e.g., virtual photons). For similar reasons, Deleuze will use the term virtual when discussing that which makes determinate, actual entities possible, and as he will say on numerous occasions, the virtual is real but not actual. A problematic field is thus not to be confused with the "objective relations between [actual] positions."

III

In turning now to the nature of problems in social and economic contexts, and the role highlighting these problems can play in a critical analysis of social and economic structures, we could begin with Ellen Wood's understanding of capitalism as a solution to an economic problem in agricultural England of the late sixteenth century. In particular, Wood argues that the elites of the English countryside lacked, unlike their peers in France and Holland, the extra-economic means to extract surplus value from those who worked their land—through the benefits of patronage or the powers of taxation—and in response to the general decline of agricultural prices in the sixteenth century English landowners turned instead to competitive rents in order to encourage productivity and thereby extract surplus value. From this solution to a socioeconomic problem, Wood argues, emerged the competitive "laws" of capitalism. Wood's work, in short, sets out to problematize these "laws."[16] Rather than focus on the problems inseparable from their solutions as the "laws" of capitalism, however, we could also begin with the simplest of interactions, and through a critical analysis problematize one's relations to self, others, and the world. In doing this our analysis may have, as Hume encourages, "a direct reference to action and society."[17] For instance, we could begin, as Hume does, with the expectations and habits that are ready to hand, such as our everyday interactions with other people. To take Hume's own example, we may believe, from longstanding prejudice, that an "Irishman cannot have wit, and a Frenchman cannot have solidity," and yet in our interactions with them we may nonetheless maintain this prejudice despite having a "very agreeable" conversation with an Irishman and a "very judicious" conversation with a Frenchman.[18] A Humean critical analysis would entail enquiring into the nature and conditions of these beliefs and behaviors, these habits and expectations, and they can become problematized as the conditions are shown to be other than what is given to experience. Deleuze and Guattari extend this critical

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approach and call for exercising "a higher 'taste'" for problems, for the conditions that made this situation possible but may well transform it and give rise to something new.[19] Since a problematic field is inseparable from its solutions, a "higher 'taste'" for the nature of problems will have a feel for the problems that are inseparable from their solutions, and this in turn may have the effect of problematizing solutions that are forced solutions, that is, solutions that that are forced upon us as solutions without a problem, such as the belief that an "Irishman cannot have wit." As Deleuze makes clear, that which is forced upon us can be very close to home:

> The sorriest couples are those where the woman can't be preoccupied or tired without the man saying "What's wrong? Say something . . . ," or the man, without the woman saying . . . , and so on. Radio and television have spread this spirit everywhere, and we're riddled with pointless talk, insane quantities of words and images. Stupidity's never blind or mute. So it's not a problem of getting people to express themselves but of providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. Repressive forces don't stop people expressing themselves but rather force them to express themselves. What a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, and ever rarer, thing that might be worth saying.[20]

Deleuze offers a similarly mundane example in his "Postscript on Control Societies" when he notes that "If the stupidest TV game shows are so successful, it's because they're a perfect reflection of the way businesses are run"—that is, "businesses are constantly introducing an inexorable rivalry presented as healthy competition, a wonderful motivation that sets individuals against one another and sets itself up in each of them, dividing each within himself."[21] Game shows take the rivalry between businesses, the compulsion and necessity to compete on the market that comes with the "laws" of capitalism, and presents them as fun, as something we ought to take up not only in our relations with others but even with ourselves. We take on this division within ourselves, for example, with the rivalry between our current self and the self that seeks improvement, the better self that will be the result of "continuing education and . . . continuous assessment."[22] Deleuze closes this essay, however, with an important question, and one that gets to the heart of his problematizing approach, noting that

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"many young people have a strange craving to be 'motivated,' they're always asking for special courses and continuing education," but, he adds, "it's their job to discover whose ends these serve, just as older people discovered, with considerable difficulty, who was benefiting from disciplines."[23] In other words, those subjected to the disciplinary institutions Foucault discussed—factories, schools, prisons, etc.—came to recognize, "with considerable difficulty," that it was not their ends being served and thus began to organize, unionize, and work toward different ends; so too now since we have transitioned from a disciplinary society to a control society Deleuze claims we have a similar need to discover, through difficult questioning, the ends that are being served.

In closing, we can return to Hume and Bourdieu. Following Hume, for Deleuze and Guattari "a higher 'taste'" for problems does not follow a rule that one can readily use to determine whether or not something is in accord with taste, but rather taste entails seeing the "consistence and uniformity of the whole," as Hume puts it in his famous essay "Of the Standard of Taste."[24] To develop taste is thus to acquire the knack or feel for the consistence and uniformity that artworks deserving of praise have. In the same way, developing a taste for problems entails a knack or feel for the problematic consistency of elements, the consistency at work in processes of learning and that are inseparable from the solutions they make possible. A "higher 'taste'" for problems is thus not, as for Bourdieu, a feel for the immanent rules of the social field, but rather it is a taste for the conditions such rules presuppose, and conditions that may well undermine them and give rise to new rules, hew habits, expectations, and ways of feeling and thinking. The difficult questioning that Deleuze would have us engage in is thus to question that which makes sense, and to do so to the point where it stops making sense. For instance, why do I ask my wife what's wrong, or ask her to tell me what is on her mind if she is more quiet than usual? My routine, habitual answer, is that I care for her and want to know if there is anything wrong so that I could help if I can. If one continues to push this questioning, however, one may get to the point where one's reasons no longer make sense of one's situation and one is left not knowing what one should do. One will have problematized their situation. It is then when the taste or feel for problems enters the scene and may give rise to alternative solutions, to alternative ways of caring that may better serve the reasons we once thought made sense. In an echo of Marx, the point for Deleuze in developing a "higher 'taste'" for problems is not that we will come to a

better understanding of the states of affairs we find ourselves in, but that we may make it possible to change them.

NOTES

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 94.
2. Marcel Proust, *The Prisoner*, trans. Carol Clark (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 13.
3. Proust, *The Prisoner*, 13.
4. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 1–2.
5. Hume, *A Treatise*, 1–2.
6. Hume, *A Treatise*, 123.
7. Hume, *A Treatise*, 10.
8. Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 41.
9. Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, 25.
10. Pierre Bourdieu, *Reproduction: In Education, Society and Culture* (Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications, 1990), 9.
11. Bourdieu, *Reproduction*, 10.
12. Bourdieu, *Reproduction*, 11.
13. Bourdieu, *Reproduction*, 9–10.
14. Bourdieu, *Reproduction*, 98.
15. Bourdieu, *Reproduction*, 97.
16. See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 2002), 100–102. This subject receives extended treatment in the book from which this work is taken. See Bell, *Towards a Critical Existentialism: Truth, Relevance and Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).
17. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 89.
18. David Hume, *Treatise*, 146–47.
19. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press), 133.
20. Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 129.
21. Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 179.
22. Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 179.
23. Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 182.
24. David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 240.

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