Materialism without Matter: Deleuze

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If there is a commonplace among philosophies of nature, it’s that the physical world is unthinking, incapable, that is, of thinking its own evental becoming. Not only in its everyday sense but also in the clichés of “high” theory, sense is bracketed from sensation, psyche from soma. Sense, the story goes, organizes sensation and gives bodies their meaning. The book of nature is written in figures, and “we” alone—human animals endowed with sense—are its readers and cognizers.¹

For Gilles Deleuze, by contrast, there is a higher level of sense that is inhuman. In one of his earliest published essays, “Mathesis, Science and Philosophy,” Deleuze was already searching for an answer to the problem of sense, namely, that “the knowing mind, as distinct as it might be in itself from [...] extension [...], nonetheless deploys the order of things in thinking the order of its representations.”² How can it be, in other words, that “the knowing mind,” which is one of nature’s figures, stands outside nature as its measurer and surveyor?

The answer Deleuze ventures is a kind of philosophical nonsense—the most rigorous nonsense imaginable. Whereas Deleuze’s early interest in mathesis naturalis (the universal knowledge of life) points in the direction of the differential calculus of his first major monograph, Difference and Repetition, it is the astonishing nonsense of Lewis Carroll and the Stoics that points the way to a theory of sense in which sense does not only inhere in propositional statements, describe or reflect states of affairs. Sense in its pure state reaches the infinitive, which could be described as a kind of nonsense because it does not reflect or re-present bodies and things but rather unfolds bodies and things: greening as the event of green, wounding as the event of being wounded, and so on.³ Alice’s adventures in Lewis Carroll’s novel illustrate the paradox of sense—its “infinite identity”—because Alice moves in two directions at once: “Alice does not grow without shrinking, and vice versa.”⁴

This higher level of sense that Deleuze (after the Stoics) calls “incorporeal” (“in-” not only because it is of matter, immanent to matter, but also, paradoxically, the idea of matter: matter as the power to think beyond the here and now) is in fact closer to sensation, to what happens between bodies: the event.⁵

The event conditions thought, but is itself unconditioned, unknowable, and therefore pre-philosophical: “It is as if events enjoyed an irreality which is communicated through language,” Deleuze writes.⁶ Elsewhere he states: “Events are like crystals, they become and grow only out of the edges, or on the edge”—by eluding the present. The event occurs on the plane of immanence, which is both material and incorporeal. We can think here of Bergson’s light-
matter-energy, which is composed of both movement-images or light (thought) and matter (extension). Neither material nor ideal exclusively, light-matter, according to Bergson’s post-Einsteinian theory of energy, are two sides of the same surface.

What does this problematic of the surface entail for our thinking of the posthuman?

There is, I believe, a common misconception in Deleuzian-inspired criticism that, in trying to reverse the damages of mind-body dualism—the prioritizing and hypostatizing of “mind” in relation to the body—tends to split the baby too evenly, giving us all matter on one side (real, substantial, agential, subversive matter) as the answer to the problem of sense. The “linguistic turn,” for all of its interest in the indeterminacies of representation, is, according to its detractors, said to have missed (or rather foreclosed?) the complexity of bodies and “becoming.” Although this narrative of “turns” turns sharply in the direction of bodies, it reverses (but does not deconstruct) the logocentric program: bodies now occupy the site of radical action and change in posthumanist and new materialist theory, but the structure (bodies, yes; mind, no) remains the same.

Deleuze’s theory of the event, which is both ideal and material, and not only by turns, presents a significant challenge then to theories that privilege not only cognition and social construction but also bodies and things. For Deleuze, bodies become actualized on the plane of immanence through the movement of concepts. These concepts, unlike bodies, occur outside history: they are not of space and time but create relations of space and time. Ideas or concepts incarnate bodies. At the same time, however, bodies, through their actions, create problem-events demanding new concepts. Neither bodies nor ideas determine the other.

This relation of events, problems, and concepts is not only human but decidedly inhuman. All of nature is self-framing in its movements, bifurcations, connections, and creations. All of nature is problematizing or mentalizing.

The plane of immanence can be thought of as Deleuze’s reworking of the Freudian unconscious. For Freud, the plane is the plane of sexuality, imagined as the drives, pure unbound energy—akin to Bergson’s light-matter-energy. The ego is a map of the body’s surface—a psychosomatic mixture. For all of his brilliance in discovering the unconscious, however, Freud interprets the unconscious as a plane of transcendence. Hence psychoanalysis becomes a science of uncovering the Oedipus complex, the triangle plan that, like a Platonic form, governs psychic life unconsciously. Deleuze insists instead that the unconscious is a plan(e) of immanence, meaning that what occurs on the plane is not a pre-given plan (the mommy-daddy complex) but movements of desire. The surreal assemblage or dream-work (Lacan calls the drives montage-machines) is therefore not a mask disguising something beyond the work of the drives (the transcendent plane) but the light-matter-energy of the drives themselves. The drives are ideal-material compounds, events of relation-encounter. What this means for Deleuze is that the unconscious must not be uncovered but must rather be produced: “We say [...] you haven’t got hold of the unconscious, you never get hold of it, it is not an ‘it was’ in place of
which the ‘I’ must come. The Freudian formula must be reversed. You have to produce the unconscious.”

The goal for Deleuze is not to uncover the transcendent plane. This, according to Deleuze, is the source of all our misery. Rather, the goal for Deleuze is to create more and more differences (material and conceptual) through encounters. An encounter occurs outside recognition; indeed, it is of the outside, which is not beyond nature but rather beyond recognition: encounters occur on the plane of immanence, when causes outside our awareness (Freud’s drives, for example) disrupt our sense of meaningful harmony, disordering our frames of sense or our “sensory-motor-schemas.” Encounters are problematizing. Instead of solving problems (discovering the hidden transcendent plane behind problems), Deleuze insists that thinking, which is of nature, creates new frames for mapping and organizing nature’s chaos. In short, thought and language do not bar nature, such that the event can only be thought by recognizing its latent structure. Instead language, being just one of the many ways that nature makes sense of itself, by folding back on itself, utilizes concepts (planes or frames) that nature or immanence creates. Thinking takes place beyond the here and now, on the plane of immanence; it is eventalized by encounters with bodies and things but, at the same, in the same movement, deterritorializes “place” to create (with) concepts that have no fixed location.

Rather than mind on one side and body on the other, matter, according to Deleuze, is already sense-making. There is a logic of sense.

The illusion is to think that because we are synthesizing machines, that “mind” is therefore the origin of that synthesizing activity. In fact, mind is already a synthesis of myriad inhuman encounters. What Deleuze calls “transcendental empiricism” is precisely his attempt to think the genetic evolution of the thinking subject, and to trace lines of potential deviation-transformation. This is not to say, however, that “matter” provides the missing origin to our investigation, as if switching from verso (mind) to recto (body) is somehow more radical or political. It’s not. The posthuman problem, read according to the letter of Deleuze, places serious doubt on the separability of mind-matter, such that an idealism of the event may be the most radical materialism there is.

It is because mind and matter are convolved (to use an old Miltonic term) that thought can be tasked with thinking its own emergence.

Instead of solving Descartes’ “error,” it’s high time we attempt to problematize it further: to think, along with Deleuze’s theory of the event, of a strange “materialism without matter.”

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FURTHER READING


4 Deleuze, The Logic of Sense, 1.
5 For a lucid introduction to Stoic philosophy that traces the “incorporeal” through readings of Spinoza, Nietzsche, Simondon, and Deleuze, see Elizabeth Grosz, The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). I have also learned a great deal from Sean Bowden’s The Priority of Events: Deleuze’s Logic of Sense (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).
6 Deleuze, The Logic of Sense, 3.
8 I am riffing on film scholar Eugenie Brinkema’s argument in The Forms of the Affects (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), in which the “turn to affect” is posited as a turn away from formal investigation in favor of the re-substantialization of bodies.
10 This is one of the essential points of contrast between Deleuze’s theory of the “event” and Alain Badiou’s. For the latter, the “event” is always eventalized (recognized, prolonged) by the thinking (human) subject.
11 For more on this topic, see Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), and Elizabeth A. Wilson, Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).


Although the “event” changes names over the course of Deleuze’s vast philosophical oeuvre, from his early structuralist writings to his late political writings (co-authored with Félix Guattari), the logic of the sense-event can be traced throughout his wide-ranging concepts, from the “time-image” in *Cinema 2*, to the “Figure/figurative” distinction in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, to the “impersonal life” theorized in Deleuze’s last essay, “Pure Immanence: A Life.”
