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Desire and ethics

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Abstract
This paper argues that it is problematic for the future of Deleuze studies that it is difficult if not impossible to answer the question 'what is the right thing to do?' from a Deleuzian perspective. It then argues that one of the key reasons Deleuze studies has made limited progress in this area is its over-emphasis on desire and the corresponding tendency to extrapolate 'ought' from 'is', which as Hume showed is a category mistake. It proposes that to develop a workable ethical discourse from Deleuze's work we need to rethink how we read his work and approach it afresh.

Keywords: ethics, desire, Deleuzism, Deleuze studies, Dworkin, Foucault

The question [of revolution] has always been organisational, not at all ideological: is an organisation possible which is not modelled on the apparatus of the State, even to prefigure the State to come?
(Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, Dialogues)

There is a certain irony in this statement because one would look in vain in either Deleuze’s or Guattari’s writings, whether alone or together, for any attempt to deal with the specific organisational difficulties of bringing about social and cultural change, much less a full-scale revolution. Their position is that changing the composition of desire is itself revolutionary, and as recent events have shown the transformation of desire on both an individual and collective level (however it is accomplished and whether for progressive political reasons or not) is not something that necessarily requires planning. Often, as was the case with May ’68, or more recently the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011, change occurs spontaneously and in a manner that no one could have

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predicted. Deleuze and Guattari proclaim themselves to be against both revolution and reform, a fact that would seem utterly inconsistent with the idea that social and cultural change is ultimately organisational. They are also wary of aligning themselves with any particular political or ideological position and tend to view all established political positions with a high degree of ambivalence, thus making it very difficult to determine what kind of a political organisation they would actually support. For example, they are clearly anti-capitalist as well as against the idea of the State, yet it is by no means clear what their preferred alternate economic and political models would be. We might thus content ourselves by saying that their politics is ultimately undecided, but I want to argue that is precisely what we must not do.

That said, I do not mean to imply by this that I agree with critics like Alain Badiou and Peter Hallward who seem to think Deleuze and Guattari’s work has nothing concrete to offer social and political activists engaged in the ongoing struggle to develop more effective strategies for reshaping the real world. However, while I disagree with Badiou and Hallward’s conclusions, I fully support the critical spirit in which they engage with Deleuze and Guattari’s work, though I would add that in my view we should read them—and indeed all philosophers—creatively as well as critically; that is to say, we should read with an eye both to identifying weaknesses in their work and to bringing forward something new and useful to our own purposes, even if the authors in question would not recognise themselves in what we do with their thought. This was essentially what Deleuze meant when he famously said that he saw his readings of other philosophers—Hume, Bergson, Nietzsche, Kant and Leibniz—as producing monstrous progeny (Deleuze 1995: 6). This is why he spoke of Bergsonism, for example, because his reading of Bergson was intended to create an application of Bergson’s thought, or better an apparatus that could be deployed to give thought to problems and circumstances Bergson himself did not and perhaps could not have considered himself. Bergsonism is in this sense simultaneously faithful to Bergson and a departure from him, without being a negation. Deleuze’s two books on cinema best exemplify this achievement—they simultaneously claim Bergson was wrong about cinema and that his work is perfectly adapted to thinking about the specificity of cinema as an art of the moving image. It is exactly this kind critical and creative approach that I want to call ‘Practical Deleuzism’.

There are a great many questions such an approach to Deleuze (and Guattari’s) work might want to address, but the one that will concern me here is this: how would one decide what the ‘right thing to do’ is from a Deleuzian perspective? This is of course a rather clichéd question, but as Michael Sandel’s work amply demonstrates, it is nevertheless a very productive question because in trying to answer it one is forced to think through in a very precise way what one would mean by ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ in a given situation, and whether or not one would want to stipulate that a particular ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ is universally ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ or in some way dependent on context or situation. For example: is abortion right or wrong? If it is right, are there exceptions? If it is right, are there exceptions? Is it possible for abortion to be right sometimes and wrong at other times? And of course the crucial question that interests me here is how would Deleuze and Guattari go about deciding whether abortion is right or wrong? Sandel, in his discussion of abortion, argues that one cannot engage this issue without taking into account the theological concerns relating to the definition of ‘life’ and dismisses the idea that it can be resolved on a neutral basis by relating it solely to questions of freedom (Sandel 2010: 251). Is this how Deleuze and Guattari would approach it? If not, then what would be their focus? We can imagine that Deleuze would most likely start by asking, ‘What kind of a problem is abortion?’ But from there it is difficult to conceive how he might answer that question. The difficulty one has in dealing with the many practical permutations of this particular ethical question from a Deleuzian perspective in any precise way is, I think, indicative of how little work has been done with respect to Deleuze and Guattari’s ethics. I cannot think of a single instance of anyone speaking in the kind of practical and prescriptive terms one finds in contemporary the moral and ethical philosophy of people like Dworkin, Nagel, Rawls, Sandel and Scanlon.

The reason for this is not hard to fathom. For many Deleuze and Guattari scholars it would be contrary to the spirit, if not the letter, of Deleuze and Guattari’s thought to speak in such tightly drawn prescriptive terms as a Dworkin, Nagel, Rawls, Sandel or Scanlon. That said, the secondary literature on Deleuze and Guattari has not ignored the moral and ethical dimension of their work altogether. But it tends to make the classic error (first identified by David Hume) of trying to argue ‘ought’ from ‘is’. For example, Rosi Braidotti’s work makes exactly this move: she explicitly claims that the ontology of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of desire can serve as the foundation for an ethics constructed in their image (Braidotti 1994: 202–4). There are two problems with this move: the first, as I have already mentioned, is that it is faulty reasoning to move from how things are to how things should be. The fact that desire functions in the way it does is not reason enough to stipulate that
that is how desire should be, or rather should be allowed to function. It would amount to saying that the only ethical position with respect to desire is one in which desire is given everything that it wants. The second problem is that (as virtually the entire history of Western philosophy has always argued) it is impossible to conceive a model of ethics on the basis of ‘desire’ because insofar as desire is thought of as an urge or impulse (whether conscious or unconscious) it exists outside of, or at least at the extreme border of the realm of rational judgement and thought.

To my mind, the most egregious instance of the error of arguing ‘ought’ from ‘is’ in relation to Deleuze and Guattari’s work, is Michel Foucault’s famous preface to the English translation of Anti-Oedipus. Foucault writes that he thinks that Deleuze and Guattari’s work can best be thought of and read as an ‘art of’ or ‘how to’ book, and not as either a new theory or new philosophy (‘Anti-Oedipus is not a flashy Hegel,’ he said). His claim is that it can be read as an exegesis on the question of ‘what is the right thing to do?’ But, in laying out his reading of Anti-Oedipus Foucault clearly makes the error of basing his conception of Deleuze and Guattari’s ethics on their ontology of desire. The problem with this, as I aim to show here, is that it leads to a critical dead end, my implication being that any quest to develop Deleuze and Guattari’s ethics must start elsewhere and proceed by other means. Foucault’s reading of Anti-Oedipus starts as follows:

I would say that Anti-Oedipus (may its authors forgive me) is a book of ethics, the first book of ethics to be written in France in quite a long time (perhaps that explains why its success was not limited to a particular readership: being anti-oedipal has become a life style, a way of thinking and living). How does one keep from being fascist, even (especially) when one believes oneself to be a revolutionary militant? How do we rid our speech and our acts, our hearts and our pleasures of fascism? How do we ferret out the fascism that is ingrained in our behaviour? (Foucault 1983: xiii)

Foucault proposes that we read Anti-Oedipus as a contemporary version of Francis de Sales’s Introduction to the Devout Life and rechristens it Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life. He lists seven principles of this new mode of devout life, which will ideally be an ‘art of living counter to all forms of fascism, whether already present or impending’ (Foucault 1983: xiii):

1. Free political action from all unitary and totalising paranoia.
2. Develop action, thought, and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction, and not by subdivision and pyramidal hierarchisation.
3. Withdraw allegiance from the old categories of the Negative (law, limit, castration, lack, lacuna) and prefer instead what is positive and multiple. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic.
4. Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable. It is the connection of desire to reality that possesses revolutionary force.
5. Do not use thought to ground political practice in Truth or political action to discredit thought. Use political action instead to intensify thought.
6. Do not demand of politics to restore the ‘rights’ of the individual, as philosophy has defined them. The individual is the product of power. What is needed is to ‘de-individualise’ by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations.
7. Do not become enamoured of power. (Foucault 1983: xiii–xiv)

If we accept Foucault’s framing of Anti-Oedipus as a kind of philosophical manual for how not to be a fascist, then we are presented with a substantial problem. In contrast to Francis de Sales’s work, Foucault’s instructions only specify what we should not do, and say nothing at all about what we should do. Foucault’s framing of Anti-Oedipus offers only a set of negative injunctions. Non-fascist living is surely a virtuous mode of living, but it is a virtuous mode of living for which no precise programme or model exists. On the basis of Foucault’s guide alone, it is literally impossible to say what would constitute a virtue in Foucault’s view of things, that is, an action which is not merely non-fascist but good in and of itself. It is very difficult to even describe what being non-fascist in this affirmative sense would be like, since all the characterisations of it that Foucault gives are themselves couched in the negative: don’t be paranoid, don’t be hierarchical, don’t be sad, don’t ground thought in truth, don’t demand the restoration of rights, and don’t become enamoured of power! If we reverse these various injunctions into their affirmative opposites, it soon becomes clear just how vacuous they are: what is the opposite of paranoid? Stable? What is the opposite of hierarchical? Flat? Equal? What is the opposite of sad? Happy? Joyous? And so on. Even if we stay with the negatives, one is still forced to wonder just what kind of a person would have all these attributes? Can one think of a single historical figure that could live up to this set of prescriptions?

In beginning this way I want to make two points: first, I think we need to re-evaluate the way we read Deleuze and Guattari. I do not just
mean we should try to read them more carefully or more rigorously, though I am not against that; rather, I mean we should re-evaluate the modality of our reading. I think we let Deleuze get away with too much by going along with his insistence that philosophers must be allowed to ask their own questions. In interviews, he often cites this principle as his reason for not wanting to give interviews in the first place and to excuse, I suppose, his failure to answer adequately the questions he is asked. But if one looks at the interviews, it is also clear that he is never asked questions that are not in some way commensurate with his own thinking, leaving him in liberty to respond to them in his own terms. Unlike Foucault, Deleuze evidently never agreed to speak to interviewers he knew would be either hostile or unsympathetic—one thinks here of Foucault’s interview with the young Maoists, and their heated disagreement concerning the role and nature of people’s courts in the establishment of popular justice (Foucault 1980). It appears Deleuze was never subjected to this kind of grilling, not in print anyway. And in one respect, Deleuze is clearly right to take the stance he does, because philosophy gains little—if anything—if it does nothing more than go over old ground, repeating the same old questions again and again. But that does not mean philosophy is better off constantly seeking new coordinates, as Deleuze and Guattari appear to be doing with their battery of new concepts, because in doing so, it isolates itself from the intellectual history and tradition that gives it both its depth and interest.

Second, in addition to asking Deleuze and Guattari new questions, that is, questions Deleuze and Guattari have not generated for themselves in one way or another, I think we also need to ask ourselves new questions. By this I mean we need to be bold enough (and for those of us who have been publishing on Deleuze and Guattari for quite a while, humble enough) to re-examine all the established readings of Deleuze and Guattari, and see whether or not they really hold up. As the great nineteenth-century American satirist Mark Twain famously said, it is not the things that we don’t know that get us into trouble, it is the things we know for sure that aren’t so. I think Deleuze Studies as a field has reached the moment when it needs to go back over its early attempts to understand difficult concepts like becoming, the body without organs, desiring-machines and so on and see whether or not the working definitions we have for these terms are really sound. This may seem to contradict my point above that I think we should read Deleuze both creatively and critically, so some further clarification may be in order. I do not subscribe to the view that there are ‘no wrong readings’ of Deleuze—I am on record as disagreeing with a number of interpretations of Deleuze’s work. That said, I am fine with those readings of Deleuze that take creative licence with his concepts and take them off on their own line of flight, just so long as they do not claim to be anything other than what they are, namely, appropriations, or what Harold Bloom usefully and with no pejorative intent calls ‘strong misreadings’. DeLanda’s so-called ‘Deleuze 2.0’ would be a perfect example of this latter type (DeLanda 2006: 4). But as I said above, I also think our readings of Deleuze should challenge the weaknesses and gaps in his work; however, instead of simply pointing out these weaknesses and gaps I think we should try to create our own solutions.

To further illustrate my main point, here, that it is difficult to determine what the right thing to do is from a Deleuzian perspective, let me give you an example of a practical question of the kind that I think (or at least want) Deleuze and Guattari’s work should be able to help us answer. Dutch journalist Linda Polman opens her recent book on international aid with the following thought experiment:

Imagine. You’re an international humanitarian aid worker in a war zone and faithful to the principles of the Red Cross, as any good humanitarian should be. In other words, you’re impartial, neutral and independent. It’s your responsibility to relieve human suffering, irrespective of the people involved and the situation on the ground. This time your mission has taken you to a refugee camp in Darfur. You do what you can for the victims, but soldiers exploit your efforts. They demand money for every well you dig and levy sky-high taxes, thought up on the spot, on all sacks of rice and tents and medicines you arrange to have flown in. They consume a slice of your aid supplies and sell another slice. Among the items they buy with the proceeds are weapons, which they use to drive yet more people into your refugee camp or even into their deaths. What do you do? (Polman 2010: 1)

I know there are numerous questions one could raise at this point about whether or not the Red Cross is a good humanitarian organisation, or whether international aid is a good or bad thing, and so on. For example, Dambisa Moyo in Dead Aid makes a convincing case that international aid not only does not work, but also helps to sustain the very regimes whose kleptocratic style of government creates the very crises aid is supposed to relieve (Moyo 2009). But given that Foucault casts Anti-Oedipus as an art of living directed at the individual subject (two words he forces us to place under erasure, as it were), we are entitled to think that Deleuze and Guattari can and should be able to tell us what to do in a complex situation like this. To put it another way, what would it mean in these circumstances to, as Foucault says we
should, withdraw allegiance from the old categories of the negative and prefer instead what is positive and multiple? If the choice is as simple as staying and trying to do the best one can for the victims or deciding that the situation is hopeless and leaving, can Deleuze and Guattari help us to make that decision? I do not think there is any way we can answer this question using Foucault’s prescriptions. This is not because it is a bad question; indeed, I would say it is a vital and necessary question—what is the point of having an art of living if it cannot help us to decide what the right thing to do is? Moreover, if Foucault is right in saying that *Anti-Oedipus* is a book of ethics, then by that very definition should it not empower us to decide—or, at the very least, empower us to begin a discussion about the best way to go about deciding—which is the most ethical way to act in all situations, even if complex and indeed fraught political situations like the one Polman imagines?

If the question is not bad, then why can Foucault not answer it? The short twofold answer is that Foucault attempts to derive Deleuze and Guattari’s ethics from their ontology of desire, and to make matters worse misunderstands and misapprehends their concept of desire. This is evident in the way he collapses two planes—the virtual and the actual—into one, and uses ideas and concepts drawn from each of these levels interchangeably, perhaps unaware that there are two rigorously distinct systems at work in *Anti-Oedipus*. One can see this in his statement that we need to develop action, thought and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition and disjunction, and not by subdivision and pyramidal hierarchisation: action, thought and desires do not all belong to the same plane; therefore, they are not commensurate concepts in the way Foucault assumes them to be and cannot be used interchangeably. As I will explain in more detail in what follows, one set of terms refers to the internal processes of the psyche, while the other refers to the external processes of micropolitics, and while the two processes are interlinked, they are nevertheless distinct from one another. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari’s principal grievance with psychoanalysis is that Freud confuses these two systems when he claims that the unconscious is formed in the image of Sophocles’ Oedipus (Lacan makes the same kind of error when he claims the unconscious is structured like a language). But there is a bigger problem, here, and that is the very premise of Foucault’s reading: he uses Deleuze and Guattari’s ontology of desire to construct his art of non-fascist living. He takes their analysis of how things are and turns it into a statement of how things should be.

Foucault thus turns the ontology of desire into an ethos, or programme for living. This move will always be brought undone by the fact that Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of desire is not inherently virtuous—they do not conceive of desire as a virtue. Deleuze and Guattari make it clear that as they see it desire can be either ‘empty’ (bad) or ‘full’ (good) and is usually some mixture of the two. In other words, desire is not inherently good or bad, but has the potential to be both at the same time. One thinks here of the stories of the concentration camp guards who murdered thousands of people by day and were good, loving family men or women by night. Hence Deleuze and Guattari’s evocation of Primo Levi’s concept of the ‘grey zone’ to describe such ethical conundrums (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 107). So how do Deleuze and Guattari conceive of desire? The most straightforward answer I can give to this question (which I shall explain in more detail in what follows) is that for Deleuze and Guattari desire refers to the operation of the unconscious in conjunction with what Freud called the perception system, which includes both external and internal modes of perception. As such, it refers to what are essentially involuntary processes of the mind and the nervous system and therefore cannot form the basis of either an ethical or a moral discourse.

Everything hinges, in this regard, on how one understands the notion of production because that is the real key to understanding Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of desire. It would not be wrong to say that desire and production are synonymous; in fact, one could say the basic hypothesis of *Anti-Oedipus* is that desire should be conceived as production (hence the concept of desiring-production). But that still begs the question of what they mean by desire. I want to answer this question in four ways. First, in the negative, so to speak: Deleuze and Guattari are quite clear that desire should not be thought of as an undifferentiated instinctual energy (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 215). Second, we have to look to delirium to understand desire as production. Delirium is the royal road to understanding desire because it shows us what the unconscious is capable of producing—a set of visions, feelings and so on that however false are utterly real to the person experiencing them. This point is crucial. Deleuze and Guattari insist over and over that if desire produces then its product is real, and not, it goes without saying, either imaginary or symbolic (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 26). Deleuze and Guattari reject Lacan’s compartmentalisation of the psyche into three separate spheres of production—the famous triad of the imaginary, symbolic and real.

[The] real truth of the matter—the glaring, sober truth that resides in delirium—is that there is no such thing as relatively independent spheres
or circuits: production is immediately consumption and a recording process (enregistrement) without any sort of mediation, and the recording process and consumption directly determine production, though they do so within the production process itself. Hence everything is production... (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 4)

In place of Lacan’s model, Deleuze and Guattari offer a unified model of the psyche whose operation consists of three types of interrelated syntheses: the synthesis of production, the synthesis of recording (registration) and the synthesis of consumption. By synthesis of production Deleuze and Guattari mean the work of the unconscious to produce what Kant refers to as intuitions. My reference to Kant here is by no means accidental—Deleuze and Guattari themselves point us in this direction. Kant, they argue, was one of the first to conceive of desire as production, but he botched things by failing to recognise that the object produced by desire is fully real (Deleuze and Guattari reject the idea that superstitions, hallucinations and fantasies belong only to the realm of ‘psychic reality’ as Kant would have it) (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 25). If the synthesis of production refers to the production of intuitions, then by extrapolation we can deduce that the synthesis of registration (or recording) refers to the mind’s uptake of these intuitions, or the imagination, while consumption is the transformation of these intuitions into concepts, or the understanding.⁸

If this Kantian reading seems surprising, it is nevertheless confirmed by Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of Lacan, which brings me to the third point. Lacan makes essentially the same mistake as Kant, Deleuze and Guattari argue, in that he conceives desire as lacking a real object (for which fantasy acts as both compensation and substitute). Deleuze and Guattari describe Lacan’s work as ‘complex’, which seems to be their code word for useful but flawed (they say the same thing about Badiou). On the one hand, they credit him with discovering desiring-machines in the form of the objet petit a, but on the other hand they accuse him of smothering them under the weight of the Big O (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 310). As Žižek is fond of saying, in the Lacanian universe fantasy supports reality. This is because reality, as Lacan conceives it, is deficient; it perpetually lacks a real object. Deleuze and Guattari see the same fault in Baudrillard’s work—hence their cryptic snipe that the concept of fantasy does not ‘compel psychoanalysis to engage in a study of gadgets and markets, in the form of an utterly dreary and dull psychoanalysis of the object: psychoanalytic studies of packages of noodles, cars, or “thingumajigs”’ (26). If desire is conceived this way, as a support for

reality, then, they argue, its very nature as a real entity depends upon an “essence of lack” that produces the fantasied object. Desire thus conceived of as production, though merely the production of fantasies, has been explained perfectly by psychoanalysis’ (25).

But that is not how desire works, according to Deleuze and Guattari, because it would mean that all desire does is produce doubles of reality, creating dreamed-of objects to complement every real object. This subordinates desire to the objects it supposedly lacks, or needs, thus reducing it to an essentially secondary role. Nothing is changed by correlating desire with need either.

Desire is not bolstered by needs, but rather the contrary; needs are derived from desire: they are counterproducts within the real that desire produces. Lack is a countereffect of desire; it is deposited, distributed, vacuolized within a real that is natural and social. (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 27)

This rejection of Lacan confirms what might be termed the neo-Kantian reading of desire I have proposed because it means that we cannot define desire in a transitive fashion: any attempt to define desire as the desire for something immediately puts us back into the realm of lack. Productive desire cannot be the desire for something, it must produce something. This brings me to the fourth point I want to make about desire. If desire is productive and what it produces is real then desire must be actual and not virtual. Deleuze and Guattari are quite explicit on this point. Referring to the formation of symptoms, such as hallucinations, Deleuze and Guattari write: ‘The actual factor is desiring-production’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 129; emphasis in original).⁹ To which they add the following important clarification:

The term ‘actual’ is not used because it designates what is most recent [which is its usual meaning in both French and German], and because it would be opposed to ‘former’ or ‘infantile’ [which is how it is used in Freud’s texts]; it is used in terms of its difference with respect to ‘virtual’. (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 129)

I doubt there is a more important or consequential statement in the whole of Deleuze and Guattari’s writings. Its importance becomes clear in the next sentence:

And it is the Oedipus complex that is virtual, either inasmuch as it must be actualized in a neurotic formation as a derived effect of the actual factor, or inasmuch as it is dismembered and dissolved in a psychotic formation as the direct effect of this same factor. (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 129; emphasis in original)
This is a major reversal of how we are taught to think about the relationship between the actual and the virtual. On this rendering of it, that which stems from the unconscious and therefore has no tangible form is treated as the actual, while that which flows from outside the unconscious, whether from the conscious or the perception system, and therefore has some possibility of having a tangible form, is treated as the virtual. To actualise the virtual, then, does not mean that something that was previously only notional or imaginary is thereby made concrete and real; rather, it means that something that was sensual is made present to the mind in an active sense. The actual is that which concerns the mind right now. Freud’s biggest mistake, Deleuze and Guattari claim, which demonstrates his failure to understand this point, was to think that the unconscious is constructed in the image of Oedipus, which would mean that the unconscious is merely a shadow theatre for the conscious and not a productive system in its own right.

My point is that there is nothing at all within Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of desire that can tell us either how we should live or how we should treat others. And this is perhaps as it must be. As Dworkin says: ‘The fact of desire—even enlightened desire, even a universal desire supposedly embedded in human nature—cannot justify a moral duty’ (Dworkin 2011: 193). And yet, this is precisely what Foucault attempts to do with Deleuze and Guattari’s work. He takes statements that have to do with the functioning of desire as the productive unconscious and turns these into moral and ethical statements. This is, in effect, a category mistake because it treats Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of how the psyche operates as the basis for a radical politics; moreover, it prioritises aspects of the functioning of the psyche that are described by Deleuze and Guattari as pathological (as Deleuze and Guattari repeatedly say, the schizo is not a model—Deleuze and Guattari do not romanticize the schizo, it is their readers who do that). Foucault transforms Deleuze and Guattari’s quite practical thoughts on political transformation into a series of more or less empty slogans—free political action from paranoia, develop action by proliferation, juxtaposition and disjunction, prefer the positive and multiple, don’t be sad, don’t be enamoured of power and so on. These slogans combine to form an image of Deleuze and Guattari’s thought that obscures what is original and interesting in it, namely the concept of productive desire. But even more problematically, in my view, it creates an image of Deleuze’s thought that is all too easily dismissed by scholars whose philosophical formation leads them to expect straightforward answers to straightforward questions (albeit highly complex straightforward questions such as the one I cited above from Linda Polman’s book).

This is not to say that we should abandon any thought of deriving either an ethical or moral discourse from Deleuze and Guattari’s work. There is ample reason to think that the opposite is the case. But it is to suggest—in fact—that we cannot build such a discourse from Deleuze and Guattari’s analyses of how desire operates. And indeed, no workable ethical or moral discourse could be constructed in this way because, as Kant shows, determining the right way to live and the right thing to do cannot be a matter of what the individual wants or thinks. My desires, sovereign though they may be to me, do not confer or justify the right to do as I please, no matter the cost to others. And while it is true that Deleuze and Guattari’s rhetoric is flamboyantly in favour of throwing off the manifold shackles that keep our individual desire in check, nowhere do they suggest that the liberation of our desire should take priority, no matter the cost to others. So while we may think of them as anarchists or liberationists, take your pick, we also have to assume that they accept the necessity that something other than desire must form the basis of our ethical or moral discourse. In other words, we cannot take the easy way out of this problem of trying to determine how Deleuze and Guattari would decide what the right thing to is and simply say that Deleuze and Guattari reject all forms of ethical or moral discourse. That cannot be true. What can be and probably is true is that they reject all existing forms of ethical or moral discourse in favour of one still to be constructed. Our job then in Deleuze Studies is to begin the process of constructing that discourse.

Notes
1. This is the basic of hypothesis of Hardt and Negri’s concept of the multitude. See Hardt and Negri 2000.
3. It was for this reason that I titled my first book on Deleuze Deleuzism—it was intended as an exploration of the problematic of how to ‘follow’ an author who instructs his readers to go their own way and create their own questions. I make this point because in a recent article, Douglas Spencer (2011) has used the term ‘Deleuzism’ as a kind of catch-all pejorative for what he sees as banal uses of Deleuze’s work. See Buchanan 2000.
6. For example, it would be very interesting to hear Deleuze’s thoughts on the concept of freedom, or even more pointedly, his thoughts on justice. Deleuze has no hesitation in saying, for example, that the Israeli occupation of Palestine is an injustice, but nowhere does he explain what in his view ought to be done to rectify the situation (Deleuze 1998: 30). But to accuse Israel of acting unjustly he must have some notion—however inchoate—of justice in mind, and that is precisely my point: we need to force Deleuze’s work to disclose answers to these kinds of implicit questions.
7. See for example my comments on Žižek’s reading of Deleuze and Guattari in Buchanan 2008: 149, n.9.
8. See Kant 1929 (particularly Book II ‘Analytic of Principles’).

References