

## A response to Sean Bowden on Hegel, Brandom and Deleuze [draft of October 2015]

### Introduction

This paper sets out a counter to Sean Bowden's striking and important pragmatist reading of Deleuze on acts, events and intentions. It addresses Bowden's rapprochement of Deleuze and Brandom, as well as his reading of Deleuze through themes and concepts derived from Hegel and from Brandom's reading of Hegel. My response to Bowden considers the three themes addressed in his argument: retrospectivity, theatricality and heroism. My aim is to question the importance of retrospectivity for Deleuze, even in the way distinguished from Hegel's understanding as proposed by Bowden. I suggest a different account of theatricality or experimental drama in Deleuze. Heroism is replaced by the idea of experimental perversion. This experimentation will cannot be normative, nor depend on versions of meaning and negation which I see as distorting imports from the Hegelian-pragmatist approach to responsibility and action as found in Brandom. In place of normativity, I would argue instead for a concept of exemplarity, where norms are replaced by the Deleuzian idea of an apprenticeship to signs guided by exemplary acts which have no need for, nor adaptation to ideas of heroism associated with specific norms.

### Against tribunals, even as theatre

If I understand Bowden correctly, an intention, act and set of consequences must be understood retrospectively in a shared social theatre where, in a further act, the hero assumes responsibility for the act *and* recognises its inevitability as an act which exceeds original intentions, again in a social theatre. This social retrospective assessment provides a pragmatic frame for intentions, acts and outcomes. From my perspective, an act can never be understood retrospectively but only followed on from in another act and transformed so that aspects of its effects on wider series are increased or decreased in intensity. This appeal to intensity over and above meaning and understanding is central to my opposition to the pragmatic frame because the guiding principles are no longer set by shared social understanding but rather by increases and decreases of intensity within series of events.

For example, in a play that sets out the actors, intentions and events of a stock market crash, the most important philosophical point is not that we come to understand collectively how acts and intentions which seemed benign came to lead to economic disaster. Instead, what matters most is that the play sets in motion *new* values which enter into communication with established ones such that past, present and future events are altered *in the intensity of their relations*. The social and existential worth of the play is not in shared understanding but in the introduction of new factors of change which are not primarily about meaning but rather about intensity: how things are felt differently rather than understood.

The dominant term then becomes selection in a subsequent perverse act, where perverse means counter to established and emerging common sense and understanding. This supplants retrospective understanding and adoption, where any definition of retrospection as an act in itself only defines a very particular and often weak kind of negative act. My concern is then not with theatricality as such, nor with a definition of acts as social, but rather with the subservience of drama, acts and the social to retrospection, understanding and norms.

The difference between the two positions can be understood, I think, through the special kind of normativity revealed in tribunals. For Bowden, a lie could be addressed in a shared space where a

retrospective account of the act could arrive at a relatively correct judgement not only about its objective features but also its sense, intentional part and extensional causes. The novelty and importance of Bowden's position is that any tribunal is a shared theatre, where a sense is expressed rather than an objective truth determined. Judgement becomes participation in the common expression of meaning. This judgement is a new act, in the double signification of an intended action and a drama enacting truths about the former act.

Like a morality play, this relation of understanding and drama leads to a long set of pragmatic guidelines. These cohere around specific types of wrong, the desirability of certain intentions, and the reprehensibility of certain acts, all within a pragmatic setting recognising the individual nature of each act in relation to the unforeseeable interaction of acts, causes and outcomes. The play weighs acts and intentions, viewed retrospectively and around the meaning of events. It values heroic preparedness to accept and shoulder the limits of acts and intentions in relation to causes and to the unpredictability of the future. Finally, it does all these things in an act creating a novel situation such that a tribunal is never purely reactive but rather transforms norms creatively, yet with the continuity afforded by retrospection, social theatre, meaning and mutually recognised norms and differences. There is then an open cascade of morality plays, each commenting on the sense and acts of earlier ones with no final just tribunal.

My position is not to deny that there can be tribunals, or that we can aspire to heroism and view acts retrospectively. Neither do I want to deny that we can and do operate in this way with respect to past acts in relation to different events and conceptions of what constitutes an event. I do not want to deny that some representation of the past is necessary for present actions. My concern is whether these phenomena and aims ought to be taken as normative and whether this normativity should be valued as a frame for action. It is worth noting how the form of this valuation is itself implicated by the discussion it applies to, since if we assume that this valuation takes the form of a judgement in a normative framework, we shall have already prejudged the answer to the question.

Though there is a dispute about interpretation and philosophical lineage and association here, the main difference I wish to draw attention to is about ways of articulating past, present and future acts and events. Should retrospection in a social theatre play a normative role in relating past acts and intentions to present and future ones, in effect, providing a normative frame for our acts, including values such as heroism? Or can a more perverse and experimental relation of act to act suffice, when guided by selection of examples and ideas of apprenticeship and the creative reading of signs?

### Questioning interlude

Imagine you told a terrible lie ten years ago. There was no way of knowing the immensity of its terrible betrayal, nor the heavy damage it would wreak many years later. Now you sit facing tear-stained and broken faces. What lines should you pick to guide your way through the storm of shifting emotions, where ever more serious outcomes, and very few happy ones, keep darkening and lighting the scene? Should you return to the scene of your first lie, to seek to know it as a meeting place of intentions, causes, meanings and acts, none of which can be accessed without a shared scene of all the implicated actors, victims, intense emotions and possible chains of events? Should you retrospectively seek a communal pragmatic tribunal and theatre, a talking cure or cathartic scene, which neither apportions final blame nor makes final reparation, but begins healing through knowledge and correct vision of the past? Should this act of healing then take its place in a series of pragmatic moments of a shifting yet guiding normativity and sense-making?

Or is the field of valuable actions more open such that another lie obscuring or deepening the first one might offer a more valuable transformation of the situation? Perversely, in relation to an emerging frame of goods and norms, perversely, in relation to images of heroism, perversely, in the eyes of wise pragmatists, you compound the original act, you choose to act as if you knew it would leave that track of future destruction, you take an original weak and conditioned intention and transform it into a destiny and you become the monstrous liar... Might that not be the right way to proceed?

### On force and necessity

The idea here is that the content of the inner intention of an agent is only determined with reference to what is true of the external action that expresses that intention 'in actuality'. Or to put it another way, the intention only becomes epistemically available – to the agent as much as to others – *retrospectively*, as the action and its consequences unfold and are made sense of in the external world, let us say, publicly or *theatrically*. (Sean Bowden, 'Tragic agency in Hegel and Deleuze')

In terms of my argument about norms and values, the quantifiers are the most significant aspects of these clear and powerful definitions of retrospection. The main one is 'only' repeated across both definitions: content of a first act is *only* determined with reference to an actual second act which expresses the earlier intention; knowledge of an intention *only* becomes available retrospectively as earlier things unfold and are made sense of publicly. This exclusivity expressed by the use of 'only' is about knowledge and content in relation to subsequent actions as expressive or sense-making. It is the form of this sense and expression that is crucial to understanding the implications of this necessity in relation to norms.

To get a feel for the stakes here it is helpful to see where there is no disagreement between two interpretations of Deleuze. The necessity of subsequent acts in relation to understanding of earlier ones is not at issue. There is no full access to the truth of an act as it is played out. Every act requires a second act for drawing out its important or interesting features. Even in a second act, the relation to the first is only ever partial and temporary. It is a matter of relative social practice. However, once this has been conceded, the deep differences appear. Far from being normative, my claim is that retrospection and sense-making are unhelpful for guidelines about the relation between acts and for a sense of the importance and interest in that relation.

The main argument and interpretative difference comes out in Bowden's discussion of the twenty-ninth series of Deleuze's Logic of Sense. This series offers support for Bowden's rapprochement of Brandom and Deleuze, via Hegel, since the series is one of the rare places where Deleuze speaks of Oedipus (via Freud and Klein) also alluded to by Hegel and discussed by Brandom. The series is where Deleuze discusses acts and intentions together. More precisely, the series stresses the doomed nature of intentions and their subsequent treatment in later acts.

The French title of the series is 'Les bonnes intentions sont forcément punies' translated as 'Good intentions are inevitably punished' in the current English translation. I prefer the translation 'Good intentions are perforce punished' to capture the sense of force alongside the sense of inevitability. This difference in translation is important because it matters why intentions are undone. My view is that it has something to do with force and punishment, as if there is a play with a cunning foe rather than with, say, a logical necessity or neutral property of time or physical reality.

*Forcément* is given as having two senses in the Littré. The first sense is 'by force', that is through a form of violence. The second is of a forced consequence, that is, where a consequence follows from a given set of assumptions. It is my view, very much against the logical frame of Brandom's analysis of intentions, that formal logical implications and the role of negation are supplanted by a different logic of sense in Deleuze's book. This 'logic' is one of force and violence, of shifting intensities underlying relations between spheres such as signification, actual identity or ideal values. The emphasis in series 29 of The Logic of Sense is then on a forced punishment of good intentions, where each of these has an important role. It matters that it is good intentions. It matters that they are punished forcefully, that is, with violence. It is significant that the consequence is a punishment.

However, what is the import of this reading of Deleuze's title for the thesis on retrospectivity? It is that the reasons for the undoing of intentions also undo notions of shared theatre and epistemic availability. The forceful punishment of good intentions also holds for notions of shared sense and of the availability of knowledge after the fact. Deleuze's point is not about intentions is not derived from the nature of knowledge and of theatre but rather about force, time and intense variations, where sense does not mean signification but a field of relations of intense variations that underlie meaning, knowledge and theatre.

So if we return to the example of the play about a financial crash. Deleuze's point is not that intentions at the time of the crash are necessarily undone due to problems concerning the availability of knowledge and that this can be remedied at a later date in a shared social theatre. It is rather that any good intention about the crash, or its later representation, or in the play take place in a conflict of forces such that these good intentions will be punished. The conflict of reasons between the two interpretations and between the pragmatism advocated by Bowden and my defence of perversion will be covered in the next section.

### Division and intense surfaces

Bowden begins his interpretation by noting a division of actions for Deleuze: '...all actions are always-already divided in two'. This division or more properly duality and reciprocal determination between the sides of the division are ubiquitous features of Deleuze's work in The Logic of Sense and Difference and Repetition. Here, there is a division between the physical image and its sense:

On the one hand, we have the agent's 'image of action', that is, his image of what he is purposefully doing (so, Oedipus' killing of a stranger and marriage to the queen of Thebes). On the other hand, we have the action such as this is made sense of in the structural-symbolic dimension of language and culture (thus, Oedipus' parricide and incest, such as this is revealed through his investigations).

Bowden associates the image of the action with agents and intentions and sense with a structural-symbolic dimension of shared language and culture in theatrical space. So the division depends on the difference between a personal image associated with an intention and a social one associated with expression and theatre. The shared space allows for retrospection and for judgements such as attribution of responsibility in relation to the personal intention:

In other words, we have the agent and his intentions on the one hand, as the element necessary for even talking about an action (as opposed to a mere happening); and on the

other hand, we have the determination of that action in a public space, and the community's retrospective attribution of responsibility for *that* action to the agent.

The emphasis on the act as attributed to an agent is important because it reveals the problem and solution at the heart of Bowden and Brandom's analysis. At the time of an intended act there is a wide set of causes and consequences that *cannot* be envisaged by the actor. It is only retrospectively that we can attribute some of them to the act and detach others. The hero adopts this attribution and detachment as burden for some intentions and limitation for others.

I want to suggest that this division is only part of Deleuze's argument. Abstracting from the Freudian language adopted from Freud and Klein, the relation between five concepts are in my view keys to Deleuze's argument about the forceful punishment of good intentions: depth, height, surface and sense and event. He is demonstrating that a well-intended act must be forcefully punished whether it is situated at depth, in height and on the surface, because of the nature of sense and events. I think my difference with Bowden's reading is in the importance and nature of each of these locations and in the meaning of sense and event.

Given shorthand definitions, depth means the physical clashes of bodies, height means the realm of abstract ideals, and surface means the surface of shifting intensities of relations. Sense means an instance of the relations of surface, and event means the relation of depth, height, surface and an instance of sense. Again in terms of a play about a financial crash, depth is captured in the violent lived struggles of the actors: physical pain, greed, exhaustion, fear, debt and plenty. Height can be the ideals of harmonious fair society, or the goodness of greed, or the importance of honesty and the vileness of deceit. Surface is expressed in the shifts of intensities in the play and among its audiences: *to grow angrier, to feel more sadness, to slowly abandon confidence.*

It is here that we can see an alternative to the pragmatic and knowledge-based reading of Deleuze's 29<sup>th</sup> series. Good intentions in the realm of ideals are undone because they have to be played out at depth where the ideal is punished for its abstract purity. Good intentions in the realm of depth fall victim to the instability of that realm, itself dependent on the play of intensities on the surface between ideals and physical depths. Good intentions on the surface, to ride the greatest intensities, fall foul of the limits of depth and the necessary direction given by ideals. Three types of action and actor are mocked by Deleuze's thesis: the dreamer drawn into the world of greed and fear; the fearless strong man, ageing and seeing his strengths wane in value; the intensity seeker, reminded of her mortality and of her fall into set ideas and categories in the eyes of others. Good intentions, shared theatre and meaning, and modern heroes are necessarily punished because we live across different realms of becoming which undo each other in a violent struggle.

The stage is therefore set, in Deleuze studies, around the emerging question of Deleuze, pragmatism and norms. Can there be a rapprochement of Deleuze and pragmatists, such as Brandom, as Sean Bowden has argued? Or is Deleuze's metaphysics resistant to some of the most important tenets of this pragmatism?