

REVIEW

SEAN BOWDEN, *THE PRIORITY OF EVENTS: DELEUZE'S THE LOGIC OF SENSE* (EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2011)

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The synoptic approach to Deleuze—arguably the dominant strand of Deleuze scholarship—has cast a great deal of welcome light on what is and remains one of the more complex *oeuvres* in recent European philosophy. However, it has also obscured a great many shifts, small and large, that characterize Deleuze's work, leading to the rather widespread impression that each of his books interlocks seamlessly with one other.

Nowhere has this approach cost as much in terms of comprehension as in the case of *The Logic of Sense*. Written in the same period as *Difference and Repetition*, and published the year after in 1969, it is idiosyncratic in a number of ways, and its central claims play out at significant distance from many of Deleuze's other works.

Alongside the manner in which it splits away from the unified Deleuze produced on the basis of the synoptic approach, *The Logic of Sense* presents a particular challenge when considered in the more immediate context of his works in the sixties, particularly the *opus magnum* *Difference and Repetition*. It is difficult to avoid the impression of an analogue of a distortion of the visual field at the conceptual level when putting these two volumes next to one another. At points, they are in entire agreement, using the same terminology in the same fashion, and with the same broad goals. At others, one can come close to feeling that the two books must have been written by a different thinker altogether.

A third factor again is also arguably in play in the poor grasp of *The Logic of Sense* that currently prevails. It is not simply the fact that it presents us with the most thorough-going structuralist and psychoanalytically-inflected moment in Deleuze's thought that has turned away readers, who sometimes claim (admittedly, supported by later remarks made by Deleuze himself) that the 'true' Deleuzian philosophy would only arise

once he had been woken from his dogmatic slumbers by Guattari. To an important extent, this way of framing things has offered an alibi, a respectable excuse for not reading what is without a doubt one of—if not the most—difficult of Deleuze’s texts, both conceptually and stylistically.

If I begin with these points, it is to highlight the significance of Sean Bowden’s contribution to Deleuze scholarship as a whole in the publication of *The Priority of Events: Deleuze’s The Logic of Sense*. Not only does the book cover in impressive detail major facets of the book’s argumentation, it will provide the starting point for readers in the future who wish to engage with the staggering and elaborate, not to say baroque, metaphysical system presented in *The Logic of Sense*. Bowden has not just exposed the ultimate inadequacy of the synoptic approach—he has provided one of the important means to go beyond it towards a more nuanced and informed approach to the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze.



As its title indicates, Bowden’s book is an explication of a single main claim, one that it asserts—entirely correctly in my view—is the spinal column of *The Logic of Sense*. This is the claim that events are the ontological primitives from which everything else arises; in other words, it concerns “the ontological priority of events over substances.” (1) Bowden’s method for elucidating this claim, its status and its role in the structure of *The Logic of Sense* is to engage in a kind of conceptual archeology. That is, he devotes chapters to six thinkers or bodies of work, present in *The Logic of Sense* and from the point of view of this central argument: the Stoics, Leibniz, Albert Lautman and Gilbert Simondon, structuralism, and psychoanalysis. This list already provides an insight into the seriousness of Bowden’s book, since all five of these points of reference have, to increasing degrees as one passes through the list, been overlooked in receptions of Deleuze’s work generally (that is, in the synoptic approach) and in relation to *The Logic of Sense*. It is perhaps the final member of this set, psychoanalysis, that has been worst attended to, a point I will return to in what follows.

Each of these chapters elaborates one piece of the puzzle that constitutes Deleuze’s eventual ontology. Moreover, they are organized in a series that broadly follows the logic of Deleuze’s own argumentation in *The Logic of Sense*. *The Priority of Events* thus gives the sense that Deleuze’s project in this book is organized around a progressive line of argument, despite the notion that each of the series—what Deleuze calls ‘chapters’ in this book, thus beginning a life-long experiment with ways of thinking about the constitution of books that continues in *A Thousand Plateaus* (plateaus) and *Francis Bacon* (rubrics)—can be connected up, rhizomatically, with any of the others.

Bowden begins by considering the contribution of the Stoics to Deleuze’s project, the first moment. It is in Stoic metaphysics that two key distinctions are to be found that lay at the heart of *The Logic of Sense*: between bodies and the incorporeal attributes that pertain to them (ie., events), and between the orthodox tertiary structure of language function (denotation, manifestation, and signification) and sense, as the locus around which this tertiary structure revolves. Here, Bowden is particularly good at embedding Deleuze’s analysis within the broader field of scholarship on the Stoics, but also at indicating the point at which Deleuze breaks, without much by way indication, with the Stoic position. While he is explicit about what he sees as the illegitimate use of propositional logic with respect to the event in the Stoics (LS 200), what Bowden also shows is that the Stoics fail, for Deleuze, to entirely free the event from the matrix of being qua substance, in the form of the all-encompassing figure of Zeus.

Bowden turns, in the second chapter, to consider the Leibnizian contribution to Deleuze’s argument. While the importance of Leibniz for Deleuze has, in recent years, been increasingly recognized, there is no question that there is more to be said on this front, and Bowden makes an important contribution to that effort here, not only with respect to the argument of *The Logic of Sense* itself, but by marking the way that Deleuze’s Leibniz is integrally connected to a variety of more recent neo- and quasi-Leibnizian thinkers, primarily Gilbert Simondon. In keeping with Deleuze’s repeated assessment of Leibniz as a thinker of the event, the core of

the theoretical edifice in *The Logic of Sense* is certainly Leibnizian. Not only, as Bowden so clearly shows, does Deleuze draw a large number of his operative concepts in this regard from Leibniz (impossibility, the significance of the calculus and its correlative concept of singularity, the expressive notion of the individual and the related notion of logical genesis in particular), the ways in which he will depart from Leibniz are along paths already implicit in his work.

The third and fourth chapters deal, respectively, with the contributions made by Lautman's particular brand of mathematical Platonism and Simondon's dynamic account of individuation, on the one hand, and structuralism on the other.

While references to Lautman and Simondon are rare in *The Logic of Sense* (as they are throughout Deleuze's work), Bowden is certainly right to highlight their contribution to the argument Deleuze is mounting. In both cases, what is provided is a means to open the doors that Leibniz closes due to theological exigencies. They are thus key precursors for Deleuze's form of neo-Leibnizianism. Lautman's work, both on the nature of the differential calculus and on the nature of mathematics as such, provides Deleuze with the means to extend the insights of the calculus into the disjunctive territory of the metaphysical surface, by conceiving of singularities as virtual problems. These in turn will be identified with events by Deleuze. In Simondon, Deleuze finds a way of expanding the Leibnizian notion of the individual. As Bowden shows, this is done by conceiving individualization as a concrete and dynamic intensive process, one which presupposes a transcendental field (Simondon's regime of pre-individuality). Thus Simondon's potential energy meets up with Lautman's notion of ideal problem as characteristic of the pre-individual structure—a further decisive set of specifications of the Stoic-Leibnizian conception of the regime of events.

Given the widespread—ill-defined and over-simplistic—characterization of Deleuze as a post-structuralist, the second of these chapters is a welcome corrective. By reading Deleuze's signal 1967 article "How do we recognize structuralism?" alongside *The Logic of Sense*, Bowden demonstrates the importance of structuralism for Deleuze, albeit (as always) from his own deeply philosophical point of view. Reading this chapter, I was struck by the paucity of considerations of this connection¹, given the richness of the connections that it opens up. In the context of the argument of *The Logic of Sense*, the invocation of structuralism serves to further enrich Deleuze's analysis by bringing to bear a range of conceptual and terminological tools that speak directly to the non-dualistic split between the structure of the event and its ongoing actualization in bodies. It also arguably provides a number of the points of contact with Lacan that will be decisive in the last and longest chapters in Deleuze's argument. Particularly strong in this chapter is Bowden's discussion of Jakobson's structural linguistics. Leaving aside the extremely clear character of the summary on its own terms, as an illustration of Deleuze's project in *The Logic of Sense* it is particularly well-chosen. This is the case, on the one hand, because the nature of language is obviously one of Deleuze's central concerns here (a claim that can only also be made, and here with caveats, of *A Thousand Plateaus* among Deleuze's other works). On the other hand, because the structuralism essay makes such heavy use of a variety of structuralist thinkers, Bowden's analysis makes it easy to situate Deleuze's own position with respect to this range of others with great facility.

While each of Bowden's chapters demonstrates the same sober, directed mastery of the source material in question, the closing chapter on psychoanalysis stands out for its significance. This is primarily the case, as I have already noted, because of the generally impoverished understanding of the role of Lacan and Klein in Deleuze's work up to and including *Anti-Oedipus*. However, it is also the case that the discussion of the dynamic genesis of sense which occupies the closing chapters of *The Logic of Sense* is the most compressed treatment of complicated theoretical terrain that Deleuze presents anywhere in his work—work known in general for its difficulty. Bowden's discussion of these chapters is thus worthy of praise on its own terms.

As Bowden clearly articulates, there is a paradoxical torsion in Deleuze's broadest line of argument in *The Logic of Sense*. If, in the end, events are the fundamental ontological category for Deleuze, then any structural features in being must themselves have an evental character. However, the structure in question is the structural

reality of events, both as the effects of the interactions of particular bodies, and as such. The problem is striking: how to account for the event of the evental structure? In *Difference and Repetition*, and in related terms, Deleuze will assert that there is no opposition between structure and genesis. *The Logic of Sense* is the text in which Deleuze will provide a line of argument that genuinely resolves the apparent opposition, through an account of the genesis of structure. In turn, then, what Bowden provides is not just a clear summary of difficult and poorly understood material, but also a clear summary of a decisive moment in Deleuze's philosophical architecture.

This apparent impasse is overcome by accounting for the genesis of the evental structure (the metaphysical surface) in terms of the psychosexual development of the speaking subject. What is particularly impressive about this last and longest chapter of Bowden's book is the way that it manages to present, at least in outline, what we might call Deleuze's metapsychology (as Bowden notes, Deleuze is not interested in the clinical practice of psychoanalysis in *The Logic of Sense* [186]). It is a decidedly monstrous account, to be sure, assembled from parts of Freud, Klein and Lacan's position, sometimes only after being reversed or turned inside out in relation to their original functioning. For example, while Deleuze leans heavily on Klein's theory of part-objects, he plays on an implicit contradiction between the notions of good object and part object in her work in order to do so. And, while this would seem to lead in the direction of Lacan's theory of *l'objet petit a* and its role in the symbolic order, Deleuze's reading of Klein directly contradicts Lacan's (insofar as it sides with Klein on the pre-symbolic position of the part-objects [186]). At the same time, Deleuze's theory of the good object is drawn from the Lacanian notion of the *imago* (see here Bowden's excellent summary of Deleuze's theory of the good object, 200-5).

Given that this example is drawn only from Bowden's account of the first of four stages in the dynamic genesis of sense, it is easy to see how convoluted the chicanes of Deleuze's position is; again, it is to Bowden's credit to have done such a good job mapping this territory.

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As a written work, *The Priority of Events* is extremely clear and very well structured. The chapters pursue the single line of argument of the book while at the same time repeating and ramifying its orientation—which is just to say that it is animated by an exceptionally well-conceived purpose, and structured accordingly. By remaining very close to both the text of Deleuze's book, and a number of the commentators that he draws upon in *The Logic of Sense*, Bowden's position never seems less than well-founded. At the same time, the aforementioned baroque character of *The Logic of Sense*—not to mention Deleuze's active indifference to distinguishing his position from those he is addressing (see 3-4)—confronts even the most careful and detailed study with pages so oblique and compressed (Bowden rather kindly calls them “condensed” [83] or “dense” [191]) that they can only be teased out by taking, sometimes significant, interpretive risks. Here, Bowden follows something like Deleuze's own approach, namely by introducing other thinkers at these obscure points in order to unfold a projected line of argument too condensed to be expounded on its own terms—perhaps it could be called a method of adjunction.

The most important case of this to my mind is the crucial, if brief, introduction of Donald Davidson's notion of triangulation, in order to tease out the Deleuzian-Leibnizian position on the relationship between predication and personhood (75-7). Like Deleuze's own adjunctive moves, the connection Bowden draws here holds out a great deal of promise for a range of new conceptual developments, particularly with respect to the role of intersubjectivity (a vexed notion throughout Deleuze's work that appears in a number of ways) and the status of knowledge (Deleuze seems, at best, only tangentially interested in epistemological questions).

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One can always demand more from commentaries on great books of philosophy, and the higher the quality of

this commentary work, the more the desire for a total account weighs on its reader. It would be easy to claim that Bowden could have shone a light into other corners of this labyrinthine book for our benefit—those parts that deal, for example, with Husserlian phenomenology, the role of Nietzsche and Plato in the analysis, or the twinned figures of Antonin Artaud and Lewis Carroll (see, however, the first page of the book for Bowden's reasons for excluding them from detailed consideration).

As for my own uncharitable, unwarranted demands: I was most struck by a double absence in Bowden's study. The first concerns the absence of any extended consideration of the ethical facet of *The Logic of Sense*. Indeed, it is here that we find the most explicit, concentrated and powerful formulation of ethics anywhere in Deleuze's work, and proof that there is more on this front in Deleuzian thought than any simplified Nietzschean-Spinozan concern for an increase in the power to act. While this ethical element of the book is briefly parsed with respect to the Stoics (42-5), no attention is given to the rather more dramatic form in which Deleuze presents his ethics of the event in later parts of *The Logic of Sense* (in particular in the twentieth, twenty-first and twenty-second series). Given, though, that Bowden's goal is to present an account of Deleuze's argument for the priority of events, that is, an ontological project, it would be particularly unfair to demand this of his book.

The other aspect of *The Logic of Sense* that is left unattended here is less a figure or theme than a certain pervasive mood. Throughout his work but centrally in *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze often remarks on the force of the famous opening lines of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Crack Up*: "'Of course, all life is a process of breaking down ...' Few phrases resonate in our heads with such a hammer blow ..." (LS 154) For my part, few phrases in *The Logic of Sense*, or, indeed in Deleuze's work as a whole, resonate so strongly as this text from the "Porcelain and Volcano" series:

'Crack' remains a word as long as the body is not compromised by it, as long as the liver and the brain, the organs, do not present the lines in accordance with which the future is told, and which themselves foretell the future. If one asks why health does not suffice, why the crack is desirable, it is perhaps because only by means of the crack and at its edges thought occurs, that anything that is good and great in humanity enters and exits through it, in people ready to destroy themselves—better death than the health which we are given.

(LS 160)

It seems to me that *The Logic of Sense*, not despite but in part because of its emphasis on humor, is Deleuze's great tragic text, charged with the affective character that marks the cusp between death and the affirmation of death as an event. This tonality is what marries Artaud's ferocity with the cupidity of Carroll, and runs through the series of this logic of sense like that fire Deleuze detects in the scholia of Spinoza's *Ethics*. Beneath the systematic exposition of a philosophy of the event runs the quicksilver of that difficult affirmation, *amor fati*. The lack of a trace of this tonality is the other thing that I noticed missing in Bowden's *The Priority of Events*.

But this exceptional study hardly deserves such miserly responses. Instead, Bowden's excellent book deserves to be read and re-read: surely the greatest praise for any book, and praise rarely justly bestowed on a book of scholarship. It is certainly warranted here.

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NOTE

1. One important exception exists, to my mind, namely James Williams' *Understanding Poststructuralism*, which devotes a whole chapter to this unfortunately overlooked feature of Deleuze's work. Moreover, Williams also presents what is to my knowledge the only meaningful elaboration of Deleuze as a post-structuralist thinker in this context.