

# Gilles Deleuze

AN INTRODUCTION

*Todd May*

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Gilles Deleuze

*An Introduction*

This book offers a readable and compelling introduction to the work of one of the twentieth century's most important and elusive thinkers. Other books have tried to explain Deleuze in general terms. Todd May organizes his book around a central question at the heart of Deleuze's philosophy: how might one live? The author then goes on to explain how Deleuze offers a view of the cosmos as a living thing that provides ways of conducting our lives that we may not have dreamed of. Through this approach the full range of Deleuze's philosophy is covered.

Offering a lucid account of a highly technical philosophy, Todd May's introduction will be widely read among those in philosophy, political science, cultural studies, and French studies.

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# Gilles Deleuze

## *An Introduction*

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*For Constantin Boundas*  
*in gratitude for his patience and generosity*



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Gilles Deleuze  
*An Introduction*



## How Might One Live?

### I

#### *How might one live?*

It's an odd question, in some sense; a question we don't ask ourselves very often. We get up in the morning, we brush our teeth, we crawl into our clothing, and burn our days as though it were impossible to live any other way, as though this particular life were the only one to be lived. As though the universe were so constructed that it required our lives to unfold in this way and in no other.

Of course that isn't what we tell ourselves. Our stories are always filled with choices, with crossroads and tangents and directions of our own making. Our lives' narratives, when we tell them to ourselves or to others, are steeped in the discarding of certain futures and the embrace of others, in the construction of a world that is to each of us uniquely our own because each of us has chosen it. But is that how we live? Is that how our lives, so often conforming, so often predictable, so often disappointing, come to be what they are?

How many of us ask ourselves, not once and for all time but frequently and at different times, *how might one live?* How many of us embrace that question, not only in our stories but in our actions, our projects, our commitments? How many of us open the door to the possibility that, however it is we are living, we might live otherwise?

## II

Perhaps it is not up to each of us to ask this question. Perhaps, instead, it falls to philosophy, as a special study, to address it. What is the meaning of life? What are its purposes? How should one live? How might one live? These are questions that philosophers ask; they report their results to us, and we, if we choose, may read and assess them for their insights.

Philosophers rarely ask these questions. They rarely ask them in their work, and seem rarely to do so outside of it.

Part of the reason for this is historical. The twentieth century saw the division of Western philosophy into two distinct traditions. Britain and the United States embraced analytic philosophy, which treated these questions as though they fell outside the purview of philosophy. For some of those working in this tradition, the role of philosophy was to clarify the limits and range of scientific claims; for others, it was to understand the nature and functioning of language. The idea that philosophy might grapple with questions of our living was seen as a sort of conceptual confusion. Philosophy is to reflect on our knowledge and our language; it is to tell us how they work, or how they ought to work. To widen the tasks of philosophy to include a reflection on what we ought to become or might become is to introduce external, perhaps even incoherent, concerns into a discipline that seeks to achieve rigor and precision above all.

The historical situation for British and American philosophy has changed over the past thirty years. Since the publication of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, it has become more nearly acceptable, in keeping with earlier periods in philosophy, to write and to think about the larger questions concerning our lives. The weight has lifted, but it has not been removed. Nearly a century of analytic work has instilled philosophical habits that are difficult to break. Those who are writing about normative matters still risk ridicule by those doing "hard" philosophy; they are still haunted by the fear of analytic failure. Too often, rather than harnessing the rigor of analytic philosophy to the task of asking these larger, more diffuse questions, instead the questions themselves are sacrificed or amputated in order to preserve the rigor of the method.

The other tradition in twentieth-century philosophy has come to be called the Continental tradition, since it focuses particularly on works

written in France, Germany, and to a lesser extent Italy. In this tradition, the question of how one might live has never been lost, even though at times it has been eclipsed by other concerns. The major thinkers in this tradition, from Martin Heidegger through Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas, are never far from questions about the nature and possibilities of our living. And yet, here in the United States, where Continentally oriented philosophers are often studying the works of these thinkers, there is a tendency toward specialization that blunts the power of the larger questions. Perhaps because in so many other disciplines, the academy values the small nuance, the concrete accomplishment, the incremental result, many Continentally oriented philosophers are wont to spend less time engaged with the larger questions that animate a thinker's work. Instead they become engaged in the interpretation of some small corner of thought, an assessment of the accuracy of X's rendering of Y's interpretation of some marginal aspect of Z's work. (I am as guilty of this as are any of my philosophical colleagues, and so any fingers pointed here are directed also at me.)

In this book, I would like to hold out against that tendency and offer an interpretation of Gilles Deleuze that, even when weaving together details of his thought, remains mindful of and oriented toward the one question that is never far from his texts: how might one live? Although his thought is among the most esoteric, and even obscure, of recent thinkers, it is, rightly seen, nothing other than an engagement with that question. In a world that holds banality to be a virtue and originality a disease, Deleuze never stops asking the question of what other possibilities life holds open to us, or, more specifically, of how we might think about things in ways that would open up new regions for living. "*We do not even know of what a body is capable, says Spinoza.*"<sup>1</sup>

### III

The question of *how might one live* is not always the question that has been asked in philosophy by those who are concerned with how our lives might go. It is a question that has emerged over the course of the

<sup>1</sup> Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, p. 226.

twentieth century, in the wake created by thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Sartre.

In ancient philosophy, the question was: *How should one live?* As the philosopher Bernard Williams has written, it is Socrates' question. "It is not a trivial question, Socrates said: what we are talking about is how one should live."<sup>2</sup> The question of how one should live involves a particular way of approaching life. It views life as having a shape: a life – a human life – is a whole that might be approached by way of asking how it should unfold. What is the course a human life should take? What are the best pursuits for a human being and how should those pursuits be arranged? What is the proper role for human beings in the universe?

Over the course of the modern period, the question *How should one live?* has been gradually replaced by another one. By the late eighteenth century, philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Jeremy Bentham are addressing a different question. No longer is the concern with how one should live, with the shape one's life should take. Now the question is *How should one act?*

On the surface, it may seem that the question of how one should act is the same as that of how one should live. One lives through one's acts, does one not? And if so, then the shape of one's life will be nothing more than the sum of one's acts. These are not two different questions, they are instead two different forms of the same question.

Appearances here are deceiving. There are two significant differences behind the question asked by the ancients and that asked by the moderns that inflect the answers to these questions in different directions. First, for the ancients, the question of how one should live is asked within a context that assumes the existence of a cosmological order to which a good life must conform. A human life does not exist divorced from the cosmological whole within which it is embedded. It has a role to play that ought to converge with or at least complement the movement of the rest of the universe. For Plato, that role consists in seeking the Good; for Aristotle it is a matter of living out a specifically human teleology. Neither doubts, nor do others, such as the Stoics or the Epicureans, doubt, that the universe has an order to it, a stability and a general form that ought to be mirrored or conformed to by the lives of human beings.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 1.

Modern philosophy writes within a context that jettisons the guiding assumption of a cosmological order. This does not mean that there is no God or that God has no efficacy in shaping the universe. The traces of God's work remain salient everywhere. It is the role of the human being that has changed. No longer does a human life find its significance in a larger order of which it is a part. Rather, a life is judged on its own merits. It answers to God or to the moral law, not to any order in which it might be embedded. Men and women stand alone before their acts and before the judge to whom those acts are submitted. There is no larger whole (or at least no whole larger than one's society) that requires one's participation.

This change has been known as the rise of individualism or alternatively the rise of the subject in modern philosophy.

The second change is inseparable from the first. We might call it the emergence of a democratic philosophy. Where there is order there is often hierarchy, and there is hierarchy in ancient order. Not only does each creature have a *place* in the cosmological order; it also has a *status*. That status involves dominance over creatures that lie below it and submission to those above. Slaves are to submit to their masters, women to their husbands. In this order, humans, particularly free males, have a privileged status in the cosmological order. Nevertheless, they too must submit to the larger whole of the cosmos itself and to those elements in the cosmos that lie above them. (One might take Plato's Good to be such an element.)

The modern period, in cutting adrift from the ancient moorings in a cosmological order, also frees itself from the hierarchies of dominance and submission inherent in that order. It casts aside the assumption of a cosmological higher and lower. Individualism is not simply a matter of divorcing oneself from the inherence in a cosmological role; it is also a divorce from the status conferred upon one inhabiting that role. With this divorce, we can glimpse the opening toward democracy and equal citizenship toward which we are still striving today.

By withdrawing allegiance to a cosmological order and by leveling out the status of human beings, the modern period becomes less concerned with the overall shape of one's life. It does not matter what the whole of a life looks like; it matters whether one is acting in the right way, whether one is fulfilling one's obligations. I no longer have to seek my rightful place in the order of things. Instead I must ask what

my proper actions are, those that, as a member of society and as an individual before God, I am required to perform.

My actions, then, are distinct from my life as a whole. In fact, in the modern period the concern with one's life as a whole is diminished. Some philosophers have taken this languishing of concern with a whole life as a philosophical loss. The question *How should one act?* divorces one's deeds from oneself in a way that is alienating. Our morality fails to be integrated into our lives; it exists out there, apart from the rest of our existence. If a person is forced to ask about how to act without at the same time seeing the answer to that question as being related to one's particular life, then one's relation to morality becomes fissured. We need to return, these philosophers suggest, to the ancient question, to allow it to renew its hold on us so that once again we may be addressed by philosophy in the space in which we live.

Other philosophers defend the emergence of the modern question as an advance upon the ancient one. Narrowing the focus of the question from lives to action corresponds to a widening of the realm of freedom to choose the life one would like to create. Philosophy should not legislate over the course of one's life; it should not determine the shape it should take, or even whether a life should have a coherent shape. If the rise of individualism and the decline of inequality are to have a meaning for our lives, it is that we can now determine (within the limits prescribed by the answer to the question of *how one should act*) the course and direction of our lives. Each of us must answer to the obligations laid out before him or her; beyond that, philosophy has no business legislating who we ought to be or ought to become. That is our private concern.

In the Continental tradition in philosophy, the modern question gave rise to a third question, one with which we continue to grapple today. Its roots are found scattered throughout the nineteenth century, but nowhere are they given as much nourishment as in the thought of Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, the central event of the late nineteenth century is the death of God. However this death might have occurred (Nietzsche offers different accounts at different points in his work), the implication is profound for human life. Those before Nietzsche who have asked the question of how one should act, almost to a philosopher, have found the answer anchored in a transcendent being, in God. It is a God outside this world that assures us of our obligations within it. The