

Gilles Deleuze, "The Work of Affect in Spinoza's Ethics", France-Culture, 4 March 1978

[Please note: this text is an excerpt from the longer presentation available as "Spinoza and Us",

<https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/resource/gilles-deleuze-spinoza-and-us-presentation-1-may-1977/>]

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Every reader of Spinoza knows that, for Spinoza, bodies and minds are neither substances nor subjects, but rather—as he calls them—*modes*. However, while merely conceiving of such a proposition theoretically is already a significant step, it is not sufficient; for, concretely speaking, a mode is a complex set of relations of speeds and kinds of slowness, within the body as well as within the thought that corresponds to that body. Furthermore, a mode is a power—of the body or of the mind—to affect and to be affected. This capacity for affect is a notion that is ubiquitous in Spinoza's work, running throughout *Ethics*.

Take any animal whatsoever. (1:00) You concern yourself with nothing other than the list of affects you can compile regarding [this animal]. Children know how to do this. If there is such a thing as a child-philosopher, it's Spinoza, certainly not Heraclitus. If there is a philosopher who undergoes a becoming-child, it's Spinoza, perhaps. Children know how to do it. Little Hans, who was so poorly psychoanalyzed by Freud, did nothing but this, and Little Hans compiles a list of affects regarding a street scene: namely, a draft horse pulling a carriage through the city. And the list he creates haphazardly follows no particular order. It goes like this: it's a *proud* beast -- and pride is not merely an affect, it is a capacity for affect -- it is proud; it wears *blinkers*, an affect of a completely different kind; it has black markings around its mouth; it's pulling a *heavy* load; it collapses; it gets whipped -- being whipped is an affect; indeed, it's precisely what Spinoza would call a *passive affect* -- it gets whipped; it creates an uproar with its legs, and so on, and the list continues. Fine.

Spinoza, for his part -- though I could have reversed the citations -- Spinoza, for his part, says: there are greater differences between a plow horse or draft horse, on the one hand, and, on the other, a racehorse, than there are between a plow horse and an ox. This is a very, very important proposition in *Ethics*. This is because the racehorse and the plow horse do not possess the same affects or the same powers of being affected, whereas the plow horse and the ox share relatively similar affects.

This is important because it then becomes clear that the plane of immanence, where the distribution of affects as well as the distribution of differential and comparative speeds occur, the plane of immanence, the plane of nature, consists not at all in separating things into those that might designated as "natural" and those possibly designated as "artificial." Artifice is, in fact, an integral part of nature since everything situated on the immanent plane of nature, on the plane of

consistency, is defined by the assemblages of movement and affect into which [these things] enter, regardless of whether those assemblages are of the most artificial or the most natural kinds.

Long after Spinoza, biologists and naturalists would attempt to describe what they termed "animal worlds", realms defined solely by affects, by powers to affect or to be affected. Von Uexküll, for instance, would do precisely this in the case of the tick, an animal that feeds on the blood of mammals. He would define this particular animal, this specific creature, by means of just three affects, and this is through no error on his part, for the tick possesses only three (5:00). Yet that's already a great deal; indeed, there are many among us who possess... well, there are many people who possess... [*Deleuze abandons this line of thought.*]

Three affects: the first [is] an affect of light, climbing to the tip of a small branch; the second [is] an olfactory affect, dropping oneself onto the mammal passing beneath the branch; the third [is] a caloric, calorific affect, seeking out the hairless region on the mammal, [*Deleuze coughs*] the warmer region where it can burrow in and find the blood. A world comprising solely three affects, even though the tick is immersed in an immense forest that ceaselessly sends out stimuli and solicitations from every direction. And yet to all of this, it remains closed off; it's deaf, it's blind, it's devoid of affect except for those three specific things. The rest of the time, it fasts; it sleeps. Thus, [there's] an optimal threshold and a pessimal threshold, a maximal threshold and a minimal threshold regarding the capacity to be affected. This isn't necessarily a great choice; the optimal threshold is just as well the tick sated with blood which is about to die [as] the pessimal, or minimal, threshold, that is the tick fasting, capable able to wait years for the mammal that will eventually pass beneath its little branch.

And such studies defining bodies, at once animals and humans, by the affects of which each is capable, laid the foundations for what is today called *ethology*; and this holds true for us; it applies to humans no less than to animals because no one knows in advance the affects of which someone is capable. This is a very long process of experimentation; it's a very long process of encounters; it's a very long process of assemblage [*montage*]; it requires a very lengthy caution (*prudence*); this is a Spinozist wisdom.

The funniest page in Spinoza -- and in Spinoza's works, there are always such pages, just as with all philosophers there are great comic passages -- is when he explains the nature of Adam's adventure and the story of the apple. In fact, this is a story of poisoning, a case of food poisoning, in which Adam ate the apple, and the constitutive relations of the apple clashed with the constitutive relations of Adam. Adam was, quite literally, poisoned: he had a bad encounter. This is ethology.

Spinoza's ethics has nothing to do with morality; rather, he himself conceives of it as an ethology, that is, as both a composition of speeds and kinds of slowness, [and] a composition of the powers to affect and to be affected upon the plane of immanence. This is why Spinoza, in a certain sense, seems constantly to emit *cries*: You don't know what you are capable of, whether

for good or for ill. You don't know in advance what your body or your soul can do. You don't know in advance what *any given body* or soul can do in this or that encounter, in this or that assemblage, in this or that combination.