

# **To Remain Worthy of What Happens to Us**

**By**

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Today I want to expound upon what I consider is a remarkable statement from a little-known philosopher, Gilles Deleuze. He was born in Paris in 1925 and committed suicide in 1995 after his lifelong and worsening lung issues made it nearly impossible for him to breathe, let alone do anything else. I won't say much more about his life, or go too deeply into his philosophy, neither of which are my focus. Suffice it to say, Deleuze considered himself an empiricist and his philosophical views of empiricism were novel. Empiricism, like it sounds, is knowledge based on experience, on sensual experience in particular. It does not necessarily deny that there may be something beyond such experience, only that we should base our understanding of the world on what we are able to experience and experiment with.

What made Deleuze's empiricism unique is that he did disbelieve there is anything beyond our sensual experiences and that there is only one plain of existence. All that exists is immanent, not transcendent. Immanence refers to all that is empirically real. Transcendence refers to something beyond our experience. I'm sure many would like to argue otherwise, but since, by definition, we cannot sensually experience the transcendent, transcendence is nonsense.

The point here is that Deleuze's lean idea of empiricism led him to have some unique implications regarding how we ought to live our lives. Firstly, he placed far less emphasis on personal identity than he did on individual change. This is so, he reasoned, because our sense of identity is based upon how we are different from others, not on how we are alike. If one identifies as a musician, it is because one is different from those who don't play music. If one is identified as an author, it is because one is unlike those who aren't. Although such differences may cause us to identify with others like us, this is still mostly because of how we differ from most others. Even twins, who may look remarkably similar, remain individuals because they are far more different than they are alike. So Deleuze places greater emphasis on our differences than on our identities.

Our experiences, which are always changing, always different, have more influence over us than our identities. For we exist not as isolated individuals inside an environment, but always in relationship to our experiences, to the surroundings and events happening around us and to us. In this way, we are always becoming different than we previously were, before things changed around us, or before we found ourselves in a new relationship to time, location, and circumstance. And if we are always becoming relatively different than we were before, then we are always becoming. We are different from moment to moment.

With this in mind, Deleuze altered the idea of "eternal recurrence" made popular by Friedrich Nietzsche, the claim that all of existence is infinitely recurring. Although this concept goes back to the ancient Egyptians and to Hinduism. It was, for Nietzsche, the result of his own thought experiment. His argument was that since the Universe is infinite, and there are an infinite number of possibilities, then our world must recur an infinite number of times. Not only are there two snowflakes just alike, there must be an infinite number of them that are exactly alike. This is hard to accept from our limited perspective but, mathematically speaking, considering the meaning of

infinity, it's hard to argue against. Still, Deleuze didn't quite accept Nietzsche's thought experiment. He agreed that things must eternally recur, given infinity, but not exactly like before, and that it is our job to make certain of this. He believed that changing, becoming different, hopefully for the better, is the purpose of our lives.

That's all I'll say about Deleuze's mind-bending ideas here. But this has been a necessary preamble to a remarkable statement from his 1969 book, *The Logic of Sense*, that caught my attention when I first saw it just a few weeks ago. "Either ethics makes no sense at all, or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us." It's this last phrase, in particular, "not to be unworthy of what happens to us," that has stuck with me. Ethics, you may recall, comes from the Greek word meaning "character." Our ethics have to do with who we are and what we are to be about. For Deleuze, this means our moral purpose is to remain worthy of what happens to us in life.

There's a lot of disgust these days about those perceived to have privilege, as if they should feel ashamed for having good experiences and opportunities. For Deleuze, there's nothing wrong with having a good life, but, as ethical beings, as persons of quality character, we ought to make sure we remain worthy of what privileges we might have. We can waste our advantages in life by simply doing what we want when we want, seeking the instant gratification of our most individual and immediate desires. Or we can use what advantages we have by recognizing our relationship and, thus, or responsibility to others. We can use the good in our lives for the good of all.

But what most intrigues me about Deleuze's secret to life, not to become unworthy of what happens to us, is that it also implies how we ought to respond to the challenges and miseries that befall us. There is much suffering in life, I don't care how "privileged" a person is considered. We are all complex individuals, and we all know what it is to feel pain, grief, loss, fear, and adversity. What Deleuze is suggesting is that we must also remain worthy of our suffering by overcoming it. We should make our struggles and challenges mean something.

As individual identities, we believe pain, grief, loss, fear, and adversity happen *to* us. We are isolated entities stuck in time and space when and where things happen to us, like hapless pawns in Eternity's game. We are victims of circumstance, we often say. But as beings that are always becoming, always changing, always a little different than before, entwined with all that is around us, everything we experience is part of who become. Our moral responsibility, according to Deleuze, is "not to be unworthy of what happens to us," by changing for the better. Notice that he doesn't say that we should become worthy of what happens to us, but that we should not become unworthy of it. I didn't get this at first, but once I realized the significance of his phrasing, I changed the title of my sermon from "To *Become* Worthy of What Happens to Us," to, "*Remain* Worthy of What Happens to Us."

Deleuze accepts that we are already worthy of both the goodness and difficulties in our lives, not because they are magical rewards or punishments placed upon by the gods or fates, but because good and bad things happen to all of us. That's part of the human experience. The question for us, the ethical question, is who are we going to become because of our privileges and our problems?

Are we going to be selfish hoarders who enjoy all that we have, even as others around us suffer? Are we going to wallow in regret and resentment because of the misfortunes and injustices that have befallen us, despite our absolute inability to change the past? Are we going to become unthinking pawns in somebody else's game, rather than achieving our fullest potential, purpose, and autonomy, despite those who would control us? These are the unfortunate choices made by some whom, in so doing, become unworthy of what happens to them because their experiences didn't result in anything truly productive. They remain caught in a cycle of eternal return, in the Buddhist Hell of Samsara, repeating the same life, the same choices, the same mistakes again and again, whether for eternity, or, as I believe is more likely the case, merely throughout one's own brief lifetime, which is tragic.

But if we see ourselves as actors within the positive and negative circumstances of our lives, realizing that good and bad don't simply happen to us, that we live in relationship to all that occurs, then we realize we have a role to play, a proper response, an ethical choice to make. The good and bad we experience will make our lives different, but we do have some choice in determining what that means for us, in determining who we become. For these are not events that happen to us. They are our events. They belong to us. They are us. To take an active role in how we respond, Deleuze says, is "to become the offspring of one's own events, and thereby be reborn, to have one more birth, and to break with one's carnal birth."<sup>1</sup>

There is obviously a tendency to take these religious and otherwise esoteric ideas literally: reincarnation, eternal return, that "you must be born again." But if these are just mythical ideas and philosophical thought experiments that work as metaphors to help us understand the human experience, then they serve to remind us how often we get caught up in our own ways, how often we get stuck repeating the same patterns, including holding the same worn-out ideas and making the same mistakes over again. What Deleuze is saying is that the events of our lives don't just happen to us. They belong to us. And we, thus, have an ethical responsibility to determine how they will shape us. We can consider them circumstances beyond our control that alter us as they please with no regard for our own agency—becoming what they make of us—or we can work to become something better.

I didn't say we can choose to become something better. I said we can work to do so. Being reborn, changing our ways, is never easy, especially in the face of tragedy and other life altering events. It takes time working through the grief and adjusting to the loss and learning to live again with whatever disabilities and losses we are left with. It's not always easy, but, again, ethics means character, and developing the character to help guide who we are to become in the future and in the very next moment is what being ethical is all about, at least according to Gilles Deleuze.

All of this causes me to think of one of my heroes: Frederick Douglass, who was born a slave, exactly when, he did not know, to a mother whom he did not know. But it was fairly obvious his father was the same man who owned him, whom he knew only as his master. The master's wife was none too fond of their resemblance, so Douglass was eventually sent away, to be ruled by another master. Despite the cruelty of his new master and the fear he lived in, Douglass secretly learned to read and came to recognize and despise the system of slavery he had been born into.

Though his circumstances insisted he was unworthy of dignity, let alone his freedom, Douglass fought in every way for his chance to fully unfold as a human being.

Ever defiant, he was eventually sent to Edward Covey for a year, a sadistic man known for his ability to break the will of the most defiant slaves. Covey began with a routine of almost weekly whippings, harsh enough to leave Douglass's back with wounds severe enough they could have killed him. When, while working in the fields, Douglass collapsed in exhaustion due to the beatings, he was beaten even worse. Although it was supposed to last a year, it was not long, only a few months, before Covey accomplished his goal. "I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there, but a few months of this discipline tamed me," Douglass recounts in the narrative of his life. "Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!"<sup>2</sup>

About six months into his stay under Covey's vicious control, Douglass again collapsed in exhaustion while working in the fields, for which Covey nearly cracked his head for slowing down the work. He left to seek refuge from the man who lent him to Covey, who was still his official owner. But the man gave the bloodied and brutalized no solace, nor even a meal, before sending him back to the sadistic tyrant. After some trickery, Covey attacked Douglass in the stables and tried to bind him with rope, upon which he would have likely beaten him to death. Douglass writes:

As soon as I found what he was up to, I gave a sudden spring, and as I did so, he holding to my legs, I was brought sprawling on the stable floor. Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don't know—I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose. He held on to me, and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected that Covey seemed taken all aback. He trembled like a leaf.<sup>3</sup>

The two men fought hard for more than two hours before Covey finally gave up in exhaustion.

I considered him as getting entirely the worst end of the bargain; for he had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him. The whole six months afterwards, that I spent with Mr. Covey, he never laid the weight of his finger upon me in anger. He would occasionally say, he didn't want to get hold of me again. "No," thought I, "you need not; for you will come off worse than you did before."<sup>4</sup>

Later in his autobiography, Douglass makes, what I consider among the most profound statements I have ever seen. "I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact."<sup>5</sup> Despite remaining Covey's slave for another six months, and for longer after that, Douglass liberated himself that day:

It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious

## To Remain Worthy of What Happens to Us

resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and *I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact.*<sup>6</sup>

Life was not easy after that, but Douglass did eventually become legally free, and became a famous orator, author, abolitionist, and women's suffragist. In 1889, President Benjamin Harrison appointed him U.S. Ambassador of Haiti. The accomplished statesman was also the first and, so far only, black man nominated to be Vice President of the United States, on the ticket of the Equal Rights Party. It would be some time after his fight with Covey that he would accomplish these things, but that was the day that he refused to be somebody that things happen to. It's when he took charge of his life, the day he truly became free.

For me, Douglass is an extraordinary example of a person who did not allow himself to become unworthy of what happened to him. This is not to imply that he was to blame for the cruelty he endured, or that he deserved it, but that he did not let it completely define who he would become. He would not remain under the circumstances. He refused his slave identity, instead choosing to be free, even if it meant he might be killed. His beatings did not beat him down. He was the master of his fate, not a victim of circumstance. He took charge of his unfolding and of how he would allow his experiences, even the harshest, to shape him.

Although few of us have experienced anything like what Frederick Douglass went through, all of us find ourselves in challenging circumstances and may feel there is nothing we can do to change them. This is often so, but it seldom means we have to let those circumstances, the unexpected and undeserved events in our lives, define who we become. We always have an ethical choice to make, a moral obligation to ourselves, not to become unworthy of what happens to us.

<sup>1</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, *Logic of Sense*, 154.

<sup>2</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (p. 18). Digireads.com. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*