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**Paper Title:**

“Willing the Event”: Expressive Agency in Deleuze’s *Logic of Sense*

**Abstract:**

A major problem threatens Deleuze’s project in *The Logic of Sense*. He makes an ontological distinction between events and substances, but he then collapses a crucial distinction between two kinds of events, namely, actions and mere occurrences. Indeed, whereas actions are commonly differentiated from mere occurrences with reference to their causal dependence on the intentions of their agents, Deleuze asserts a strict ontological distinction between the realm of causes (including psychological causes) and the realm of events, and holds that events of all types are incorporeal happenings which are inseparable from expressed sense. For Deleuze, what counts as one’s action thus does not depend on one’s intention, but rather on a process of “making sense” of that action. Nevertheless, Deleuze continues to speak of the need to “will” the event. In order to resolve this apparent contradiction, I will read a conception of “expressive agency” into *The Logic of Sense*.

**Keywords:**

Deleuze, events, sense, action, agency, expression
“Willing the Event”: Expressive Agency in Deleuze’s
Logics of Sense

A major problem appears to threaten Deleuze’s project in *The Logic of Sense*.¹ He rightly makes an ontological distinction between events and substances, happenings and fixed things. However, he appears to collapse a crucial distinction – one he makes elsewhere² – between two kinds of events or happenings: actions and mere occurrences. Whereas actions are commonly differentiated from mere occurrences with reference to their causal dependence on the prior intentions or willing of agents, Deleuze asserts a strict ontological distinction between the realm of causes (including psychological causes) and the realm of events, and holds that events of all types are impassive, impersonal and incorporeal happenings which are inseparable from expressed sense. This means that what counts as one’s action does not depend on one’s intentions or willing; it rather depends on an impersonal process of “making sense” of that action. Nevertheless, Deleuze continues to speak of the need to “will” the event and take personal responsibility for what happens. In order to resolve this apparent contradiction, I propose to read a conception of “expressive agency” into *The Logic of Sense*. This conception would allow Deleuze to retain the category of intentions or willings as a means to distinguish actions from mere occurrences, but it would also understand them in

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² See, for example, G. Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (London: Athlone, 1993), 41: ‘an event is called what happens to the thing, whether it undergoes the event or makes it happen’.
properly Deleuzian terms as the “effects” of an expressive “sense-event”, and not as the psychological causes of action.

Before outlining in more detail the problem of action and agency in *The Logic of Sense* and advancing a solution, two brief remarks are in order. First of all, this essay focuses exclusively on *The Logic of Sense*. It does not seek to resolve the problem of action and agency in this text with reference to Deleuze’s other works, and for two reasons. The first reason is that, despite the synthetic approach often taken in Deleuze scholarship, it is not at all clear that Deleuze’s texts conceptually harmonize with one another in such a way as to easily allow for this type of move. Deleuze himself indicates the difficulty in his “Note for the Italian Edition of *The Logic of Sense*”. He explains that, from *Difference and Repetition* to *The Logic of Sense* to *Anti-Oedipus*, not only do the technical terms which reappear in these different texts signify different philosophical concepts, the problems addressed, the methods employed, the subject matter and the theoretical allegiances also differ from one text to another. Of course, this is not to say that inter-textual studies of Deleuze’s approaches to issues such as action and agency cannot be undertaken. It is simply to say that they cannot be carried out without taking these wider transformations into account and acknowledging that even though different texts might address the same abstract issue, it does not necessarily follow that they address that issue in convergent ways. The second reason why this essay does not appeal to Deleuze’s other texts is that these works (that is to say, his major works, as opposed to his historical studies) are self-contained, systematic works of philosophy. In other words, in relation to a particular problem or set of problems (difference and repetition, sense

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and events, desire and politics, etc.), each of Deleuze’s major works advances a novel set of interrelated and inter-defined concepts which allows him to make interesting contributions to the major branches of philosophy: ontology, ethics, aesthetics, philosophy of language, political philosophy, and so on. We should thus expect that each text contains its own resources for understanding its various elements and resolving its internal tensions, even if these resources remain implicit or relatively underdeveloped. Indeed, I will demonstrate in Section 3 of this essay that *The Logic of Sense* already implicitly contains the conception of expressive agency that I advance in Section 2, as a response to the problem of action and agency identified in Section 1.

The second preliminary remark that needs to be made is that this essay does not deal with much of the excellent literature exploring Deleuze’s approach to action and agency. The reason for this is that many of these texts either do not deal with *The Logic of Sense*, or else they tend to run together Deleuze’s thinking about action and agency in *The Logic of Sense* with his thinking about these issues in other works. And as I have just suggested, this is, if not an illegitimate move, perhaps overhasty, at least insofar as the attempt has not first been made to treat *The Logic of Sense*’s approach to these issues in terms which are proper to that text alone.

Preliminaries aside, I will now detail the difficulties involved in conceptualizing action and agency in terms of the philosophy of events advanced in *The Logic of Sense*. I will then

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outline an account of action and agency that resolves these difficulties before demonstrating that such a conception is nascent or already implicit in *The Logic of Sense*, and needs only to be made explicit.

1. Actions and events in *The Logic of Sense*

Two kinds of events, two kinds of things that happen, are commonly distinguished: actions and mere occurrences. Whereas mere occurrences are events which are passively undergone (so, metal corroding or ice melting are events of this type), actions are events that are actively done (such as my waving a greeting to someone, putting on my shoes in order to go for a walk, or swearing an oath). Actions, it is commonly held, are the intentional doings of some agent.

Indeed, it seems important to distinguish between these two types of event – actions and mere occurrences. Some events we cannot make sense of unless we have reference to intentions. In particular, the physical movements of persons only make sense for us insofar as we can distinguish in each case between what is intentionally done and what is passively undergone. As in the well-known example, the category of intentions is what allows us to distinguish between somebody’s arm merely “going up” and somebody raising their arm, for instance, to vote at a committee meeting.5 And of course, it is extremely important in moral and legal contexts that we have reference to, and discriminate between, what persons intentionally do.

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and what they passively undergo. Only in this way can we appropriately assign moral and legal responsibility for what happens.

In speaking here of intentions, I am only really concerned to capture, in very general terms, a common way of conceiving of action, that is, with reference to certain types of causes. On this common conception of action, an action is an event which is brought about by a prior, *psychological* cause, which is the intention of the agent (or the desire of the agent, a combination of desire and some beliefs about the means to achieve that desire, a decision to act for some purpose, a willing of some end, etc.). Actions, then, are distinguished from other kinds of events – mere occurrences – insofar they are brought on by prior psychological causes. And these prior psychological causes are held to be the individuating principle of those actions being the particular actions they are.

In *The Logic of Sense*, however, Deleuze challenges this conception of action whereby action is both explained and distinguished as a type of event (distinct from a mere occurrence), with reference to its causal dependence on a prior psychological state or intention that somehow brings it about. Deleuze claims to follow the Stoics in asserting an ontological distinction between: on the one hand, the realm of bodies in general with their relative, causal activity and passivity, and their particular physical, biological and even psychological states; and on the other hand, the realm of “what happens” – the realm of *events* in general – which are uniformly characterized as impassive, incorporeal and impersonal happenings. For Deleuze,

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6 For this general approach to action, see D. Davidson, “Actions, Reasons and Causes”, *Journal of Philosophy* 60(23) (1973), 685-700.

7 On events as incorporeal and impassive, see Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 4-5; on events as impersonal, see 148 and 151.
as distinct from corporeal things, events are incorporeal and exist only as the expressed or expressible sense of propositions.⁸

Three points bear mentioning here for the purposes of clarification. The first is a terminological one. When Deleuze speaks in The Logic of Sense of the causal order and the actions and passions of bodies therein, he is not talking about the two kinds of events we have been discussing: actions and mere occurrences. For Deleuze, what happens – an event – is never of the same nature as, and is not reducible to, the actions and passions of bodies. These latter notions simply pick out general characteristics of bodies situated in a causal order relative to one another. An active body is a body that, human or not, brings about something for another body, and the passion of a body refers to the action of a more powerful body.⁹ Events, on the other hand, are impassive, incorporeal and impersonal.

The second point follows from the first. For Deleuze, events never belong to the same ontological register as any of the causal antecedents – whether psychological causes or the physical states of brains on which these are often thought to supervene – by means of which we normally distinguish between types of event, that is, between actions and mere occurrences.

The third and final point we need to make here is that Deleuze appears to collapse the distinction between actions and mere occurrences, because events of both kinds are only ever impassive happenings. Activity and passivity are the characteristics of bodies situated in a

⁸ See Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 12, 21-2 and 181.

⁹ Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 163.
corporeal, causal order relative to one another. Events, on the other hand, are impassive and incorporeal.10

What exactly does it mean to say that events are impassive, incorporeal and impersonal? For Deleuze, it has something to do with the relation between events and sense. As he asserts in a number of places, events in general exist only as the expressed or expressible sense of propositions bearing on “what happens” in general.11 He even goes so far as to say that the event is sense itself.12 His argument for the inseparability of events and expressed sense is complex, but it can be summarized in the following way.13 As has already been said, Deleuze follows the Stoics in asserting an ontological distinction between the realm of bodies and causes and the realm of events. He also follows the Stoics in claiming that bodies are causes to one another of everything that happens, but what happens – the effect or *event* – is a proposition or *propositional item* (Stoic lekta), which is to say, something that is *true* of the

10 Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 5.

11 Consider the following citations from *The Logic of Sense*: “It is characteristic of events to be expressed or expressible, uttered or utterable, in propositions which are at least possible” (12); “sense … does not exist outside the proposition which expresses it” (21); “the event is sense itself … [it] belongs essentially to language; it has an essential relationship to language” (22); “the event does belong to language, and haunts it so much that it does not exist outside of the propositions which express it” (181).


bodies the proposition denotes.\textsuperscript{14} The proposition, however, envelops its own internal division.\textsuperscript{15} On the one hand, it denotes a state of affairs; on the other hand it expresses a sense—sense being, in Frege’s terms, the “mode of presentation” of the referent, or as Deleuze puts it, the “condition of truth”.\textsuperscript{16} But the sense expressed by a proposition is not compresent with that proposition. Sense must be distinguished from any actual spoken or written utterance, because no utterance says its own sense.\textsuperscript{17} Deleuze also argues that the sense of a proposition cannot be located in those relations which are normally invoked to explain sense. Sense must thus be distinguished from the relation of denotation between the proposition and objective states of affairs; the relation of the proposition to a person’s beliefs and desires; and the relation of the proposition to general concepts and their conceptual implications within a fixed conceptual scheme.\textsuperscript{18} Following Deleuze, a proposition denoting a state of affairs expresses a sense, but this sense can only be explicitly stated by a second proposition whose sense, in turn, can only be stated by a third proposition, and so on indefinitely.\textsuperscript{19} In other words, the event exists as the sense of the proposition bearing on what happens, but this sense must be produced by constantly bringing language to bear on itself, and even by creating new means of expression. Moreover, as Deleuze makes clear in his references to psychoanalytic theory, sense is always being produced in this way in an “intersubjective” or social space—a social space which is irreducible to any particular group or collective functioning as the

\textsuperscript{14} Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 4-5. On this topic in the Stoics, see also M. Frede, “The Original Notion of Cause”, in Essays in Ancient Philosophy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 135-8.

\textsuperscript{15} See on this, Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 25.


\textsuperscript{17} Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 28-9.

\textsuperscript{18} Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 12-22.

\textsuperscript{19} Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 28-9.
ultimate arbiter of meaning (conventionalism). This is why the event is said to be impassive, incorporeal and impersonal. It results from an on-going and open-ended process of making sense both of what happens and what is said about what happens. The event is thus sense itself: a “sense-event”. And this “sense-event” is ontologically distinct from, and irreducible to, the activity and passivity of bodies located in the corporeal, causal order.

But now, in relation to the category of action, this ontological divide between the causal realm of bodies and the incorporeal realm of events gives rise to the counter-intuitive thought that my action does not depend for its determinateness on my prior willing or intention to do that thing. Or again, my action does not depend for its determinateness on my prior psychological state acting as its cause and individuating principle. Rather, my action is a type of event, and its determination is inseparable from the open-ended expression of the “sense” of what I do.

But in fact, the experience of a kind of “gap” between my prior intention or psychological state and the determinate nature of my action is familiar to us from experience. It is the experience of coming to realize that my action is not in agreement with what I thought was my intention: this intention which, on the ordinary view, is supposed to be the cause and individuating principle of my action’s being the determined happening it is. So, for example, let us say that one morning I go outside with the intention, of which I am vaguely aware, of playing fetch with my dog and giving her some much needed exercise. In playing with her I

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20 The structural, symbolic and intersubjective dimension of language and culture has an indispensable role to play in Deleuze’s account (couched in a psychoanalytic vocabulary) of the “dynamic genesis” of sense and the event. See Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 186-233.

21 Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 22.
find myself vocally correcting her when she does not bring the ball right back to my feet, or when she pauses to sniff something, or chase her tail, before picking up the ball to bring it back to me. Let us now say that my wife sees this happening and wants to know why I do not just play with the dog and give her some exercise. Why am I training the dog? Teaching her to be obedient? Establishing my position as the dominant member of her human pack, or whatever dog whisperers are constantly telling dog owners to do? Now, I am initially surprised by my wife’s reactions and questions because, as I said, my intention, of which I had a vague conscious awareness, was simply and precisely to play with the dog and tire her out. But then, in my discussion with my wife, I come to realize that what I am really doing (and so what I really wanted to do) in no way resembles my original conscious intention – the intention which, on the ordinary view of things, is supposed to be both the cause of my action and its individuating principle. In an odd way, it appears that my action is transformed by articulating it, by making sense of it, in an intersubjective context. To take up an important concept in *The Logic of Sense*, perhaps we could call this open-ended process of making sense of what happens the “*quasi-cause*” of the event, which is distinct from the kind of causality which is at work in the corporeal order and irreducible to it.

In any case, the question now arises: given that what *counts* as my action does not entirely depend on my prior, conscious intention functioning as the cause of my action, can I be responsible for what I do? Can I be responsible for what I do if I do not know – or do not yet know – exactly what it is I am doing? Is the action even “mine”? It would appear that, in cases like the above where I do not have a clear understanding of exactly what it is I am doing, I can nevertheless take responsibility and be held responsible for what my action turns out to be. Practically speaking, I and others simply affirm that doing as mine, or affirm me as the agent of what was done, even apart from any considerations related to moral
responsibility. But in what is this affirmation grounded if agent-responsibility cannot be understood in purely causal terms?

This being the subject of the present study, we can remark that Deleuze in no way dismisses the ideas of agency and personal responsibility for what happens, despite treating actions as impassive and impersonal events which are inseparable from expressible sense and irreducible to physical and psychological causes. Indeed, for Deleuze, we have to “become worthy” of the event, and he is highly critical of the attitudes of resignation and ressentiment in the face of the sense-event. Moreover, in the “Twenty-First Series of the Event”, Deleuze advances a conception of “willing the event”. The very notion of “willing the event”, of course, appears inconsistent with Deleuze’s understanding of events as incorporeal. But the contradiction is only apparent. For Deleuze, “willing the event”, in the case of an action-event, will not consist in causing some particular, intended action, clearly conceived of prior to the act. It will rather consist in willing the “sense-event” from which our determined actions are inseparable, but where this sense-event also creates in us our willing. As Deleuze explains, as opposed to a corporeal or “organic will” there is a type of “spiritual will” which wills now not exactly what occurs, but something in that which occurs, something yet to come which would be consistent with what occurs ... : the Event ... The event is not

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22 Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 149 and 152.

23 See Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 148-50. The primary focus in this series is on willing and taking responsibility for events that happen to us, as opposed to willing and taking responsibility for what we actively do. But as we are arguing, if they are incorporeal, impassive and impersonal events inseparable from expressed or expressible sense, our determinate actions will be, at least from a certain point of view, things that happen to us.
what occurs (an accident), it is rather inside what occurs, the purely expressed ... [I]t
is what must be understood, willed and represented in that which occurs.24

Furthermore, for Deleuze, this spiritual will does not pre-exist the event and its expression. The event and its expression rather determine the will (retrospectively, as will be seen):

It is a question of attaining this will that the event creates in us; of becoming the quasi-cause of what is produced within us.25

A full explication of these and related passages is obviously required. Before coming to this, however, it will first of all be helpful to step outside the complex language and textual machinery of The Logic of Sense and attempt clarify what Deleuze might mean by “willing the event” when the kind of event at issue is an action. I will do so with reference to the idea of “expressive agency”. The account I will offer is inspired by, but does not duplicate, the work of Charles Taylor on expressive agency.26 It also bears some similarity to elements of Robert Pippin’s work on Hegel’s philosophy of action, as well as to his study of Nietzsche’s famous claim in the Genealogy of Morals that “there is no doer behind the deed” and that “the deed is everything”.27

24 Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 149.
25 Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 148.
27 See R. B. Pippin’s Hegel’s Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and “Agent and Deed in Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals”, in K. Ansell-Pearson (ed.)
2. An account of expressive agency

My account of expressive agency involves four essential claims:

i) While the agent with her intentions can no longer be thought to be behind her actions in the traditional causal sense, she is certainly “out there” in her actions such as these are interpreted or made sense of by others.28

ii) While the actions of agents are multiply interpretable by others, these others are themselves “out there” in their multiply-interpretable actions.

iii) An action will count as being the action of a particular agent insofar as both this agent, and other agents, are able to recognize her in that action.

iv) These multiple interpretations and recognitive processes take place in a shared expressive medium or language which is not already given or fixed but is always being produced.

Taking these four claims together, we will see that an action will count as mine – both in my eyes and in the eyes of others – insofar as my willing it is coordinate with my willing that in

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28 By “interpretation” of an action, nothing more is meant than that an action is “presented” in a particular but contingent way by means of a proposition that can be made sense of by others.
which all actions (including interpretative action) will be made sense of as determined happenings attributable to specific agents. That is to say that an action will count as mine – both in my eyes and in the eyes of others – insofar as my willing it is coordinate with my willing the sense-event taking place in our shared expressive medium.

Before we can understand this conclusion, we must examine the above four claims more closely. The first claim was that whilst the agent with her intentions can no longer be thought to be behind her actions in the traditional sense, she is certainly “out there” in her actions. Initially, this looks like the well-known expressivist claim that an agent’s intention is both revealed in, and inseparable from, what he or she effectively does. In other words, what an agent actually does in the external world expresses his or her inner intention in the strong sense that the intention does not have any reality apart from its embodiment in concrete action(s).\textsuperscript{29} Indeed, somebody’s failure to act to fulfil a stated intention when they have the means and opportunity to do so gives us the strongest possible reason for denying the reality of that intention, no matter how strongly the person in question might protest. For example, if I state an intention to leave work in time to be home by 7pm but end up working until 7.30pm for no extra-ordinary reason, neglecting in the process my opportunity to catch an early bus home, this is clear evidence that I did not “really” intend to be home by 7pm.

But we will also need to add to this expressivist position the Deleuzian claim that an action, as a type of event, itself does not have any reality outside of its expression in propositions. We might say that the agent with her intentions is thus not so much behind her actions as in her actions as made sense of or interpreted. And this is clear from the example given several paragraphs above: the view of me as an agent wanting to discipline my dog is not to be

\textsuperscript{29} On this point, see Taylor, “Action as Expression”.}
derived from my earlier conscious intention acting as a direct cause of my action (indeed, the intention of which I was aware was only to play with my dog and give her some exercise). The view of me as an agent wanting to discipline my dog is rather derived from an interpretation of what I was doing, which was carried out in an intersubjective and linguistic context, and which the parties involved (including myself) came to recognize as being my act. Again, in this case, I am not so much behind my actions as in my actions as interpreted.

The second claim involved in our account of expressive agency is that the actions of agents are multiply interpretable by other actors who are themselves “out there” in their multiply-interpretable actions. The idea here is that the action in which I, as an actor, have my being, really takes place at several levels, or is inseparable from a number of related actions. On a first level, we have the action that I am doing, whatever this will be determined as being. On a second level, we have the action of interpreting, articulating and even contesting the nature of this action on the first level. And finally, on a third level, we have the series of interpretable actions which “will have determined” the authority of those persons (including myself) doing the interpreting of my action on the second level, and the seriousness of their interpretations. This last point seems important, for it is clear that not everybody will be recognized as having either the normative or de facto capacity to contribute to the determination of the sense of my action. Indeed, it may even be that I lack this normative or de facto capacity to contribute to the determination of the sense of my own action. In short, the interpretation of my action will be inseparable from the interpretation of series of actions – interpretative or otherwise – characterizing those doing the interpreting.

To illustrate this point, let us say that I have gone into my backyard with the intention of playing fetch with my dog and so exercising her. I correct my dog’s mistakes, raise my voice
at her, and so on, as before. My neighbour looks over the fence and says a few choice words, from which I am given to understand that he thinks I am a contemptible individual who is bullying his dog. Well, I can certainly contest this interpretation of my action, perhaps divesting myself of the belief that I am innocently playing with my dog, but pointing out that I am not so much bullying my dog as training her to be a well-behaved, obedient and eventually sociable animal. But let us say that, judging from the tone of my neighbour’s remarks, I interpret his action of interpretation as nothing more than an attempt on his part to shame me and make himself feel superior to me. In this case, I might feel I have license to ignore his interpretation of my act, especially if it has often been observed that, in his dealings with his fellows, he acts to belittle them. Let us also say that, having observed a great many of my neighbour’s speech acts over time, I have solid grounds for believing that he is somebody whose assertions in this case should *not* be taken *seriously*, because, for example, he continually propounds views about dogs that are contrary to those that I and others successfully rely upon. Well, given the ostensible character of this particular actor, I would do very well indeed to ignore his interpretation of my action, which is to say that I would do well not grant him any *authority* over the interpretation of what I am doing in my backyard with my dog.\(^3\) In sum, as an actor, I may be out there in my action such as this is

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\(^3\) The position outlined here with regard to the “seriousness” of interpretations and the “authority” of interpreters is quite close to Robert Brandom’s neo-Hegelian account of “deontic scorekeeping” within recognizable communities. In particular, Brandom emphasizes the constraint our social practices impose upon us as we undertake commitments (beliefs and desires) and keep track of one another’s entitlements to these commitments according to the roles they play in complex patterns of inference. See Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). For an accessible account of this position, see Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 157-204. In the present essay, what I am calling the “seriousness” of an interpretation is a matter of its *consistency* with other accepted claims.
(multiply) interpreted by other actors. But these interpreting actors are also out there in their multiply interpretable actions, and in such a way that this impacts upon both the seriousness of their interpretations and the authority with which I invest them as interpreters. Indeed, as I noted, even the seriousness of my interpretation of my own act, along with the authority which other people grant me as an interpreter in particular matters, will depend upon how my general character is perceived through the lens of my habits of speech and action. If, for example, a number of my past actions have been taken to demonstrate a bullying character, how could I credibly give myself out to my neighbour as someone who is “merely training” his dog?

The third claim involved in this account of expressive agency is that an action will count as mine insofar as both I and others are able to recognize me in that action. What is required here is a different understanding of what constitutes the “success conditions” of an action. On the common-sense model, the criterion for the success of an action is that the agent’s original intention, conceived of prior to the act, has been fulfilled. On the expressive account of agency, however, “success” requires that I “recognize” myself in my action in the same way that others recognize me. Indeed, it would be difficult to say that I have performed a particular act if nothing I do is recognized by me or by others as that act.31 As in the above example, when my wife convinces me that I’m not really doing what I thought I was doing (what I was conscious of intending to do, namely, innocently playing with my doing), I come to share with her the recognition that what I was really doing (and so what I really wanted to

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31 This point is clearly expressed by Pippin, “Agent and Deed”, 381-2.
do) was trying to make my dog more obedient. In this case, my wife and I recognize that the action “trying to make Kiki more obedient” succeeds in expressing something about me as an agent. But if there is serious disagreement about what it is that I am doing, if those I invest with authority disagree about what I am doing, a specific action cannot be unambiguously attributed to me. And this situation creates a problem for me: it prevents my action from being “successful” and thereby diminishes my sense of autonomy.

The final claim in this account of expressive agency is that the multiple interpretations and processes of reciprocal recognition just described take place in a shared expressive medium. This expressive medium is language, but language here, I would suggest, has to be taken in a very broad sense. It includes words, obviously, but also bodily gestures, background theories about the world and persons, and so on. Within this expressive medium or language, what we are all trying to do is indicate how things stand with ourselves and with each other in our various doings. What is crucial, moreover, is that the elements of this expressive medium are not given once and for all. Everyday language and a furrowed brow may be sufficient for my wife and I to recognize how it is that I am acting in the backyard with our dog. But in other, more complex intersubjective contexts, new words, gestures, theories, and so on, may need to be produced in order to creatively overcome the differences between how we and how others think about what we are collectively doing.32

So, taking these four claims together, we can now recall what we set out to show, namely, that when it comes to explicating the philosophy of action and agency in The Logic of Sense, the Deleuzian notion of “willing the event” need not be understood as simply and directly

32 On the way in which, for Hegel, the gradual production of ever more complex “expressive media” allows for more refined understandings of our activity, see Taylor, “Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind”, 90-2.
willing some particular action. Indeed, we can now postulate that willing the event is inseparable from an expressive engagement with the sense-event taking place in our shared expressive medium: through the interpretation of actions, the contestation of these interpretations, the creation of new means of expression, and so on. As has just been shown, through our expressive engagement with the intersubjective dimension of the sense-event, we “make sense of” series of actions-events which are attributable to series of agents. Moreover, because this “expressive engagement” is itself a type of action, it will also be made sense of at the level of the sense-event. What “making sense of expressive activity” entails is that interpretations are invested with more or less “seriousness”, and the agents of expressive activity are invested with greater or less “authority”, with regard to the determination of the series of actions-events under consideration. On this account of expressive agency, then, an action can come to count as mine, not merely because I first will it and subsequently achieve what I intended to do; but because both I and others expressively produce the conditions in which we are able to recognize particular, determinate actions as expressing something about my intentions and thus about me as the agent of these particular actions. In other words, an action can come to count as mine – both in my eyes and in the eyes of others – insofar as my willing it is coordinate with my willing the sense-event which is taking place in our shared expressive medium, and which produces my determined actions, intentions, willings, and so on, as “effects”.

This account of expressive agency thus promises to resolve the problem with which we began. On the one hand, it will allow us to retain the category of willing or intentions in order to distinguish between actions and mere occurrences; only now, the intentions which are said to lie behind our actions (including our expressive actions) will retrospectively appear as “effects” of the sense-event taking place in our shared expressive medium. On the other hand,
it will allow us to understand what Deleuze means by willing and taking responsibility for what happens, even as he maintains that the realm of events (whether actions or mere occurrences) is ontologically distinct from the realm of psychological or other corporeal causes. To sum up with a citation from Deleuze, for an action to be an action and to count as mine, it is not so much a question of me directly willing it as “attaining this will that the event creates in us; of becoming the quasi-cause of what is produced within us”.

3. Expressive agency in *The Logic of Sense*

In outlining the idea of an expressive agency, I have not yet referred to the text of *The Logic of Sense*. This is primarily because Deleuze does not present or argue for such a conception in any detailed or systematic way. However, a number of crucial passages demonstrate that an expressive conception of agency is functioning, albeit mostly implicitly, in *The Logic of Sense*. So it is to an analysis of these passages that we must now turn.

As mentioned in Section 1, in the “Twenty-First Series of the Event”, Deleuze asserts that one must exchange one’s corporeal or “organic will” for a “spiritual will [volonté spirituelle]”, and that it is the event itself – understood as a sense-event – that “creates in us” this spiritual will. As he proceeds to argue, this spiritual will

wills now not exactly what occurs, but something in that which occurs, something yet to come which would be consistent with what occurs ... : the Event ... The event is not

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33 Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 148.  
34 Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 149.  
what occurs (an accident), it is rather inside what occurs, the purely expressed ... [I]t is what must be understood, willed and represented in that which occurs.\textsuperscript{36}

Finally, Deleuze enjoins us “to become the offspring of one’s events and not of one’s actions, for the action is itself produced by the offspring of the event”.\textsuperscript{37}

What must firstly be acknowledged is that, in these passages (and particularly in the last passage cited), Deleuze is thinking of action as a type of incorporeal event as opposed to raw corporeal activity. Given that, as noted above, Deleuze makes a strict ontological distinction between the realm of bodies and causes and the realm of incorporeal events, he cannot be suggesting that an incorporeal event produces an “offspring” capable of corporeal activity. Indeed, incorporeal events have no causal efficacy whatsoever.\textsuperscript{38}

Following on from this point, the second thing to be understood is that action is not to be explained with reference to the prior psychological or brain states of an agent functioning as the causes of action. This is precisely what Deleuze means when he writes that the “organic will” must be exchanged for a “spiritual will”. Moreover, it appears that the notion of a “spiritual will” cannot be understood in isolation from the notions of the event and the expression of sense. As Deleuze puts it, the spiritual will is the will that “the event creates in us”. My suggestion is that the argument to be made here is that the spiritual will is inseparable from the incorporeal event which expresses it, as well as from the sense that is made of this event. If the incorporeal event in question is an action, we will thus say that the

\textsuperscript{36} Deleuze, \textit{Logic of Sense}, 149.

\textsuperscript{37} Deleuze, \textit{Logic of Sense}, 150.

\textsuperscript{38} Deleuze, \textit{Logic of Sense}, 7.
spiritual will is determined only as this action-event which expresses it is made sense of in
the ideal, incorporeal and impersonal dimension of sense. In other words, by being made
sense of in the intersubjective dimension of the sense-event, an action-event retrospectively
reveals something about the agent of that action, such that we can say, with Deleuze, that the
“action is produced by the offspring of the [sense]-event”. This, then, is an instantiation of the
first element of my account of expressive agency: the agent with his or her intentions is not
so much behind her actions as “out there” in her actions such as these are interpreted or made
sense of in a shared expressive medium.

The second claim involved in the above account of expressive agency is that while the
actions of agents are multiply interpretable by others within a shared expressive medium,
these others are also “out there” in their own multiply-interpretable actions. And it appears
that Deleuze’s defends a claim of this kind in The Logic of Sense. In a striking passage in the
“Twenty-Fifth Series of Univocity”, Deleuze writes that the individual – I would here like to
say actor or agent – must

grasp herself as an event; and … grasp the event actualized within her as another
individual grafted on to her. In this case, she would not understand, will \[voudrait\], or
represent this event without also understanding and willing \[vouloir\] all other events
as individuals, and without representing all other individuals as events ... Counter-
actualizing each event, the actor-dancer extracts the pure event which communicates
with all the others and returns to itself through all the others and with all the others.\(^{39}\)

\(^{39}\) Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 178-9 (translation modified). The notion of “representation” that Deleuze is
employing here must be understood with reference to The Logic of Sense’s positive discussion of the “usage of
representations” in Stoic philosophy (144-46), not with reference to the kind of representational thought that
This passage clearly indicates Deleuze’s understanding of the intersubjective and linguistic dimensions of action and agency. First of all, Deleuze asserts that the agent (individual, actor-dancer, etc.) must “grasp herself as an event”, which is to say, must grasp herself as the “offspring” of the event. Or again, the agent must grasp herself as possessing a spiritual will which is inseparable from the representations or interpretations of the action-events expressing it. Secondly, the agent must understand the incorporeal action-events which express her will to be inseparable from other individuals or actors who are themselves events – which is to say, other agents whose willings are similarly inseparable from the multiply-interpretable events expressing them. In other words, for Deleuze, the representation of an action, and hence the will, of a particular agent (actor-dancer), is inseparable from the representation of an entire series of “communicating” actions-events and their corresponding agents. What are these other, “communicating” actions-events? Although Deleuze does not specify, we can readily imagine that they include actions of three types. First of all, since representing is a kind of action, the series of communicating actions-events will obviously include, for want of a better word, acts of interpretation (as well as further interpretations of these interpretative acts). Secondly, since an isolated action of a particular individual only tends to make sense when viewed in relation to his general patterns of behaviour, or within a broader project or subsuming narrative, that isolated action should be thought of as “communicating” with various series of related actions-events, namely, those actions making up the ethical character and life-story of the particular individual concerned. Finally, since acts of interpretation are, as actions, “motivated”, any act of interpretation must be

understood to be in communication with that series of interpreted actions constitutive of the ethical character of the interpreter.

This brings us to the notions introduced in the previous section of the “seriousness” of interpretations and the “authority” of interpreters. It does not seem controversial to say that, for an interpretation or representation to be taken seriously or accepted, it must be consistent with other accepted claims. Similarly, it is uncontroversial to suggest that granting authority to an interpreter is a matter of granting him an entitlement to his interpretations, because of their seriousness, but also because of other factors related to his ethical character or perceived motivations. At face value, however, these points do not appear particularly “Deleuzian”, and readers will object that Deleuze would have no truck with words like seriousness and authority. Nevertheless, the argument can be made that these notions are of a piece with the discussion of “castration” in the Twenty-Ninth Series of *The Logic of Sense*. Indeed, in Deleuze’s description of the “dynamic genesis of sense”, “castration” names the process through which persons attain to the structural-symbolic dimension of language and culture, and thus effectively participate in the on-going determination of the sense-event taking place in this dimension.40 Indeed, Deleuze follows Lacan in understanding “castration” as both

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40 On this point, see Bowden, *Priority of Events*, 221-7, 268-72. Although his overall focus is somewhat different, this is also Žižek’s reading of how the notion of castration functions in *The Logic of Sense*. As he writes, “is ‘symbolic castration’ not also the name for a process by means of which the child-subject enters the order of sense proper … ? So, far from tying us down to our bodily reality, ‘symbolic castration’ sustains our very ability to ‘transcend’ this reality and enter the space of immaterial Becoming … First, the impassive-sterile Event is cut off, extracted, from its virile, corporeal, causal base (if ‘castration’ means anything at all, it means *this*). Then, this flow of Sense-Event is constituted as an autonomous field of its own, the autonomy of the incorporeal symbolic order with regard to its corporeal embodiments”. See Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 74.
giving up the infantile desire to control the other’s desire, and positioning oneself within a symbolic structure of language and culture which organizes desire in a rule-like way. In other words, with respect to desire, castration involves an individual’s recognizing for the first time the “seriousness” of claims and the “authority” of claimants as inter-subjective rather than merely subjective phenomena, which is to say, as phenomena which are subject to normative assessment.41

The third claim involved in the account of expressive agency presented in the previous section is that an action will count as mine insofar as both I and others are able to recognize me in that action. Again, the word “recognition” is clearly not part of the Deleuzian vocabulary. However, we can distinguish between recognition as correctly grasping a pre-given identity (the type of recognition Deleuze critiques in *Difference and Repetition*),42 and recognition as the acknowledgement of a normative or social status, as when we recognize or acknowledge another person’s right to something even when there is no objective fact of the matter to which to refer. Indeed, it appears that this latter understanding of recognition is not incompatible with Deleuze’s just-mentioned discussion of the structural-symbolic dimension of language and culture. For to be “castrated” is simply to recognize and be recognized within the structural-symbolic dimension of language and culture, that is, to acknowledge and claim a series of social statuses which allows one to participate in the on-going production of the intersubjective sense-event.

Now, as was argued in Section 2, reciprocal recognition is crucial to understanding the “success conditions” for action on an expressive account of agency. And indeed, Deleuze

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41 On this, see Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 202-9.

appears to argue something similar in the appropriately titled “Twenty-Ninth Series – Good Intentions Are Inevitably Punished”. Avoiding the complex use of psychoanalytic vocabulary that Deleuze employs in this section of the text, we can see that he makes the following points. He first of all distinguishes between intended action, projected on what he calls a “physical surface” as an “image of action”, and accomplished action, which is projected on a “metaphysical” or “transcendental surface” – what we can call the surface of the on-going and intersubjective sense-event. He then goes on to say that the intended action is not really opposed to the accomplished action. Rather, each action is always-already divided in two. He writes:

On one hand, the entire image of action is projected on a physical surface, where it appears as willed ... ; on the other, the entire result of the action is projected on a metaphysical surface, where the action appears as produced and not willed ... The famous mechanism of “denegation” (that’s not what I wanted …), with all its importance with respect to the formation of thought, must be interpreted as expressing the passage from one surface to the other.

We see here, then, an important confirmation of a Deleuzian conception of expressive agency. My intended action is, initially, the image I have of what I am purposefully doing. The accomplished action, on the other hand, is that which is reflected back to me, in our shared expressive medium, as “what I was really doing” and so “what I really wanted”. If both I and others come to agree on what it is that I am doing, reciprocal recognition will have been achieved and the action will, “for all intents and purposes”, count as mine. On the other

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43 A detailed analysis of Deleuze’s relationship to psychoanalysis in The Logic of Sense can be found in Bowden, Priority of Events, Ch. 5.
44 Deleuze, Logic of Sense, 207-8.
hand, when there is serious disagreement about what it is I am doing, or when those I invest with authority disagree about what I am doing, reciprocal recognition has failed and a specific action cannot be unambiguously attributed to me. This situation, of course, upsets my sense of autonomy. It creates a problem for me – a problem that is neatly captured in the phrase “but that’s not what I wanted!” Nevertheless, what I am doing can still come to count as my action insofar as I am able to transform the difference between the intended action and the accomplished action into what Deleuze calls the “crack of thought”. What this means is that, when I encounter situations where there is disagreement about what it is that I am doing, I am driven to action at another level. That is to say that in order to overcome the difference between what I imagined I intended and what it turns out I intended, I am driven to creatively engage with the expressive element of the sense-event – that expressive element of “pure thought”, as Deleuze also calls it, from which all determined action is inseparable. Through such engagement, I hope to reconcile my and others’ perspectives on my action and thereby attain the will that the sense-event creates in me.

The final claim involved in Section 2’s account of expressive agency is that the multiple interpretations and recognitive processes that determine actions-events and their agents take place in a shared expressive medium (or language) which is not already given or fixed but always coming about. But in fact, we have already seen that Deleuze defends a version of this

45 Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 208. It is worth noting that the “crack of thought” is here understood as the sublimation of the “trace of castration”, recalling the suggestion made above that, for Deleuze, castration names the process through which persons come to effectively participate in the on-going and intersubjective determination of the sense-event. See Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 218-19.

46 Deleuze calls the “metaphysical surface” – that dimension in which my action appears as produced and not willed – the “surface of pure thought”. See Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 208. The qualification “pure” signals that thought is here to be understood as impersonal, that is, irreducible to the thoughts of particular thinking persons.
thesis in *The Logic of Sense*. First of all, as was seen in Section 1, Deleuze argues that events in general only exist as the expressed or expressible sense of propositions. Moreover, sense must be produced, and always remains to be produced, by expressive activity, that is to say, by bringing language to bear on itself and even by creating new means of expression. The expression of sense, and hence the determination of an event, is thus always open to future, and indeed novel, language-events. This is precisely what Deleuze means when he writes that “language … is endlessly born, in the future direction of the Aion where it is established and, somehow, anticipated”, that is, insofar as its expressible sense is concerned; and what this language talks about is “the past of states of affairs which go on appearing and disappearing in the other direction”.47 Actions, then, being events, are interpreted and determined in an on-going and open-ended way in a shared and fluid expressive medium.

But it is also clear that the above-mentioned recognitive processes take place in this shared expressive medium. For the recognitive process is nothing other than the expressive and intersubjective attempt to reconcile first- and third-person perspectives on action and agency, through offering interpretations of the relations between communicating series of events, through the contestation of these interpretations, through the creation of new and more adequate means of expression, and so on. Through such expressive engagement or “willing” of the sense-event, we attempt to invest interpretations with more or less “seriousness”, and interpreters with greater or less “authority”. We thereby hope to determine, “for all intents and purposes”, exactly what it is we are doing. In other words, through our expressive engagement with the sense-event we attempt to achieve recognition, for ourselves and for others, of the “will” that the sense-event is creating in us. To do this is to become, not the direct cause of our actions, but their “quasi-cause”.

47 Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 167.
4. Conclusion

At the outset of this essay, it was observed that the collapse of a crucial distinction between actions and mere occurrences in Deleuze’s *The Logic of Sense* presented a problem for the philosophy of events advanced in this work. However, the account of expressive agency offered and subsequently identified in *The Logic of Sense* resolved this problem by viewing the intentional agent – the one responsible for actions – as an “effect” of the same general process of sense-making that applies to events in general. The intentional agent is determined when both the agent and others agree that a particular act-description succeeds in describing something about the agent of that action. Such agreement often happens as a matter of course. Indeed, in a great many cases, an agent and her recognitive community simply understand her actions in much the same ways. But in other cases, some type of “expressive engagement” will be required in order to achieve agreement about action and agency: the offering of new interpretations of the action in question, contesting such interpretations, making sense of what is said about the action, interpreting interpretative actions, creating new expressive tools, and so on.

But now, if this Deleuzian account of expressive agency is cogent, it not only resolves a problem in *The Logic of Sense*, it also allows us to position Deleuze’s work in relation to contemporary debates about the nature of agency and action. In particular, this present study is suggestive of a number of connections that might be established between *The Logic of Sense* and contemporary work on expressive agency, carried out in relation to the thought of Hegel and Nietzsche by a number of thinkers cited above, including Charles Taylor, Robert...
Pippin, Robert Brandom, Aaron Ridley and David Owen. I sincerely hope that it is not too long before a desire to pursue such projects can be expressed in concrete action.

References


