

The Pragmatism of the James Brothers

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What do Henry and William James have in common, besides being brothers ? Perhaps to have shared the same vision of pragmatism. David Lapoujade's book renews the comparison between the work of the writer and the philosopher with a Deleuzian analysis, just as effective as biographical approaches.

David Lapoujade, *Fictions du pragmatisme. William et Henry James*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2008, 287 pages, 29 €.

In a course on Leibniz in 1987, Deleuze hailed William James as an astounding genius, the equivalent to philosophy as his brother Henry James was to the novel. Deleuze added that he lamented the lack of a serious study on the James brothers and their relationship. Today, David Lapoujade, editor of a posthumous collection of « texts and interviews » by William James and author of a previous book on his thought¹ delivers just such a comparison. The analysis is faithfully Deleuzian—both in terms of content and method.

One, two or several James?

In a process that was dear to Deleuze, a chorus of voices is called up to make the two brothers speak in a language that is both one and multiple. The first voice, heard from the beginning to the end of the work, is that of Deleuze himself. Indeed, the three parts of this study

¹ G. Deleuze, *L'île déserte et autres textes. Textes et entretiens 1953-1974*, Paris, Minuit, 2002 and *Two regimes of Madness : Texts and interviews 1975-1995*, D. Lapoujade (Ed.), Semiotext(e) 2007. D. Lapoujade, *William James. Empirisme et pragmatisme*, Paris, PUF, 1997, Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 1997.

can be read as further enhancements of the few isolated remarks that Deleuze made about the James: (1) the first part covers the comparison of their two works as being respectively about the consciousness and about its relationship to the body; (2) the second part touches on the relation of the consciousness to the world through knowledge and; (3) finally, the third part is on the relation of consciousness amongst themselves in society. To explain further, the first part invokes their perspectivism, a philosophy that defines each individual by the point of view from which the world appears to them, an idea that Deleuze wrote is not the same as relativism, neither as written about by the James brothers nor by Leibniz.² The second section confirms the presence in the works of the brothers James of an “archipelago world” of the “patchwork experience” that dwell in different points of view and in which Deleuze saw one of the principles of William James.³ The third and final part completes the two previous ones by illustrating the other major principle of pragmatism, according to Deleuze, that of the search for a new community founded on trust.⁴ Subjects in a variety of perspectives, a background of immanent experiences in relationship, a community of the future under construction, this is the first way to read the James.

But one can reconstruct the entire analysis by listening this time to the voice of Bergson—unless it is Deleuze again, speaking this time with a Bergson voice. Now dualisms strike us in the analysis, as it involves interpreting, throughout, certain differences of nature, which lead back to that between the “ready made” and the “becoming” – distinction that Bergson himself believed to find in the pragmatism of William James as well as in his own metaphysics⁵. Thus, the generalised perspectivism should not lead one to forget that it is necessary to distinguish two types of points of view in the James brothers’ works and, above all, to distinguish two bodies in each individual: a surface body, disciplined, perceiving and acting, and a wild body, full of emotions that boil intensely in the depths. In the same way, the world of experience is the object of two types of knowledge not to be confused. There is knowledge “by familiarity”, constructed from established habits and acquired ideas, that is to say “ready made”; but there is also ambulatory, nomad knowledge, constantly in the process of becoming, that disorients acquired knowledge and moves from experience to new experience. Finally, the call of the community serves no purpose until we have divided this poorly analysed mixture and

² G. Deleuze, *Le Pli. Leibniz et le baroque*, Paris, Minuit, 1988, p. 27. (Trans. *The Fold : Leibniz and the Baroque*, 1993)

³ G. Deleuze, *Critique et clinique*, Paris, Minuit, 1993 p. 111. (Trans. *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 1997)

⁴ « *William et Henry James sont bien frères, et Daisy Miller, la nouvelle jeune fille américaine, ne demande qu'un peu de confiance, et se laisse mourir parce qu'elle n'obtient pas ce peu qu'elle demandait* », (William and Henry James are certainly brothers, and Daisy Miller, the new young American woman, only asks for a bit of faith and lets herself die because she doesn't get what little she asked for.) *ibid.*, p. 112-113.

⁵ Cf. Letter from Bergson to William James June 27, 1907, in *Mélanges*, Paris, PUF, 1972, p. 727.

separated *closed* communities—superficial societies with already instituted rules where individuals lose themselves in the desire to conform to roles that are expected of them—from *real* communities—vital associations that are deeper, more open and undefined, where unity does not dilute the multiplicity that composes it but, on the contrary, favours the creative power of each individual.

Lend an ear a third time and now you will hear Spinoza and Nietzsche echoing this reaffirming vitalism. Lapoujade finds in the James what Deleuze had found in the ethical conceptions of Spinoza and Nietzsche rather than in the political thought of Marx: the description and denunciation of the condition of alienation in humanity. The denunciation of established values is superposed to the critique of the “ready made” and the affirmation of life relays the call to creative effort. The characters in Henry James’ work are alienated, dispossessed, separated from what they can do and captured by power struggles where the will of nothingness dominates. One follows in the course of the book, a succession of powerless figures, appropriated by the capitalist system of debit and credit, possessed and sucked dry by predatory families, closed in by their own bad conscience or their resentment towards life, prisoners even of a dogmatic conception of the truth—all the way to the end of nihilism, to the man who wants to perish—then the transmutation of the will to possess into a “giving virtue” signals a conversion and “second birth”. Pragmatism will present itself then as a philosophy that liberates, where men can readapt their power to act and to think in a gesture of self-affirmation of their liberty that merges with *amor fati*—the American “yes” seeming to echo the Nietzschean “ja”.

Between brothers

But the two brothers themselves, did they speak with one voice? Or was their understanding disharmonious? The work of Lapoujade asks the question of the method of comparison between two heterogeneous works, one psychological and philosophical and the other literary.

One could empirically establish the comparison of the works on the real relationships of the authors. After all, why compare William to Henry rather than to Goethe, and Henry to William rather than Descartes, if not because they were born of the same parents, lived in the same period and in similar milieus and because they read each other’s works? But Lapoujade voluntarily leaves aside any biographical consideration in explaining their similarities and differences. He does not feel the need to situate their works in New England nor to mention the

influence of their father, Henry Sr., theologian close to Swedenborg and friend of Emerson, nor to exploit the correspondence between the two brothers—three volumes of which have been published to date, nor even the diary of their sister Alice. His study intends to compare their works directly, as if fraternity was not a relationship from which it was necessary to depart empirically, but a relationship to investigate that it is necessary to construct conceptually. A difficulty arises however at this level: how to compare *directly* the concepts and theses with characters and stories?

A first way to do this would be to show that one applies in his domain what the other proposes in his. The characters Henry creates illustrate, for example, the conception of the stream of consciousness that William proposed in psychology: A resembles B. In fact, Lapoujade sets aside such a conception, which would no doubt lead one to reduce one work to be only a transformation of the other—the works therefore lacking in originality. Nonetheless, the general framework of the confrontation is given by the work of William James: this is what provides the axes of comparison. He returns to the outline of his previous book on the philosopher in whose thought he had identified three axes⁶. First, a “psychology of intensity” which relates to the organisation of the field of consciousness around a personal identity centre, which is visible here in the title of the first part of the book “Focus” (nature of the consciousness and of the self, the relation to the brain and the body in general). Secondly, a “metaphysics of experience” which illustrated a theory of the relations and connections between experiences within the radical empiricism of William James, this becomes the second part of the book: “Nexus” (definition of experience, of knowledge and truth). Finally, pragmatism, understood as the method to rediscover trust in this world and create new relationships in order to form a free society is then presented in the third section entitled “Socius” (affirmation of liberty, relation of consciousness and action, crisis of confidence and creation of new modes of existence, notably of new common worlds.) The work of Henry James is thus entirely set out along these three axes, psychology, epistemology and practical philosophy, which are all integral to the system of his brother.

Structural analysis represents a second method of comparison between heterogeneous sets. It consists in extricating a system of abstract relationships between non-specific elements, which are incarnated in different domains (called “models of realisation”). When the nature of the relationships and elements is specified, these different models, even if heterogeneous between

⁶ This outline is even more apparent in his thesis than in the book already mentioned which does not reproduce the first part. cf. D. Lapoujade, *Pour une pratique de la pensée. Psychologie, empirisme et pragmatisme chez William James*, Université Paris X Nanterre, 1996.

them, present a common structure that is verified by enunciating the homologies between them (A is to B as A' is to B'). Lapoujade resorts to such a method on several occasions, when he locates in the thought of William, like in the narrations of Henry, a common “ordinal structure”, a same “configuration” or “triangular organisation”, that is to say a “relation in three terms, a triad” (p. 37-39). In the psychology of William James, every consciousness is in a relationship with objects that it perceives from its point of view, according to its own interests, and one of the tasks of psychology is to describe this focused relationship. We are therefore in the presence of three elements in relation to one another: the consciousness of the psychologist observes, from the exterior, the consciousness of his object of study who is, in turn, focused on his own objects. The same goes for the short stories and novels of the writer of a given perspective: what the subject of study is to the psychologist, the main character is to the narrator. Thus we find two types of descriptions in Henry James: the descriptions of the subjective focusing of a character upon a privileged object (Daisy Miller seen by a young man in love) and the objective descriptions of the narrator of the subject in the first relationship. Lapoujade also uses this structure in terms of time, by comparing the compound rhythm of knowledge in William’s work with the three moments that accent Henry’s tales. (cf. pp. 136-137)

These structural analyses are refined and convincing. And yet, Lapoujade could not stop there. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari showed that these two ways of thinking the relationship between two terms, by “transformation” or by “structure”, should be transcended by a conception of “becomings” from one to another, because these were two ways to subordinate the difference to identity, either in terms of a direct similarity or indirect homology⁷. A becomes B at the same time that B becomes A: this should be the new formula of “comparison” or “disparison”. While different in nature, these two terms are in an inseparable correlation, forming a kind of circuit where they exchange or capture the determinations of the other, like the sea that becomes earth and the earth that metamorphoses into sea in the paintings of Elstir.⁸ One can find in Deleuze endless examples of the same formulas describing this new assemblage (*agencement*) where what counts is to know “what happens” between the two: “reciprocal presuppositions”, “embrace and mutual exchange”, “coupling and body to body”, “double capture”, “asymmetric synthesis”, “sampling and incorporation”—always two terms that “borrow from and add to one another, by nature of their difference or dissimilarity”⁹. If Lapoujade’s study is Deleuzian, it is by virtue of this methodological posture even more than in

⁷ Cf. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*, Paris, Minuit, 1980, p. 285-292. (Trans. *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987)

⁸ Cf. G. Deleuze, *Proust et les signes*, Paris, PUF, 1964, p. 61-62. (Trans. *Proust and Signs*, 1973)

⁹ G. Deleuze, *Différence de répétition*, Paris, PUF, 1969, p. 269. (Trans. *Difference and Repetition*, 1994)

his analyses of the content: “Are we not in reality dealing with a kind of exchange or mutual theft? One makes philosophy a kind of adventure novel while the other makes novels a reflective form, the narrative of the mental and its ways of reasoning. One makes action the new centre of gravity for philosophy; the other makes thought the new subject of the novel; as if each one stole from the other what came to him in his right. It is of this theft or exchange that is the subject of making a conceptual account.” (Quote from back cover) so much so that the two brothers make “just one consciousness, in the intervening space between their differences.” (p.119) The secret dream of Lapoujade was it not to paint a double portrait of Henry James *literally* bearded and one of William James *philosophically* clean-shaven?

One could wonder at the idea that action is the object of the novel and thought is that of philosophy and put into question the reality of these statements. One could also wonder about the Bergsonism of analyses, which in the end make William the philosopher of image-movement (in direct practical relation with the world) and Henry the novelist of image-time (in indirect, contemplative relation), which is another way to justify the back and forth from one to the other. One could also show that the systematically Deleuzian perspective that animates Lapoujade’s work on the James moves in its detailed analyses to “all kinds of decentering, slippings, breakings, secret transmissions” that were the joy of Deleuze when he studied an author.¹⁰ We will insist more on what, in our eyes, is the principal attraction of this work. For example, Lapoujade excels at giving in just a few lines the essence of a work of Henry James, in an elegant and precise style. Particularly brilliant are the descriptions in the last part which have a dramatic tone describing the tales of these lost lives, broken on the outside or split on the inside and for whom it is always “too late”. Lapoujade has succeeded in mixing the continuous stream of conceptual exposition with the broken course of tales of human drama.

Translated from French by Julie de Rouville

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¹⁰ G. Deleuze, *Pourparlers*, Paris, Minuit, 1990, p. 15. (Trans. *Negotiations*, 1995)