

# William James

## An ethics of thought?

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**W**illiam James's pragmatism, and in particular the thesis according to which the sole truth of ideas is the difference that they make, and therefore also the interest that they create, has often been felt to be an offence by those who consider themselves to be engaged 'for' thought.<sup>1</sup> Shouldn't ideas be disinterested, supremely indifferent to the interest that they create? I will try to show here that – at once both thematically, that is to say in a declared manner, and practically, that is to say immanently – there is an ethics of thought at work in James's œuvre. This ethics is pragmatic, certainly, because the question is posed at the level of effects, not at the level of what authorizes. But it will be a matter here, we will see, of a pragmatic *constraint*, a constraint which confers on the refusal of certain effects, accepted as perfectly legitimate by many 'ethical' philosophers, the power to put thinking to the test, to oblige it to expose itself to the violence of the world. If my attempt succeeds, it should lead to wonder about the tranquil and consensual judgement like this one: 'history is lit by the deeds of men and women for whom ideas were things other than instruments

**Recent years have seen a growth of interest within francophone philosophy in the work of English and American empiricists and pragmatists, quite distinct from the transcendental epistemological concerns that characterized its reception in Germany. This essay by Isabelle Stengers is part of this trend. Engaging with pragmatism via Bergson and Deleuze, it shifts the focus of James's philosophy from epistemology towards the questions of the world and of experience in the making. In particular, it envisages pragmatism as a demanding 'art of consequences', a conception akin to Donna Haraway's notion of accountable situated knowledge. This is an art that guides Stengers' own work both about the 'ecology of practices' (*Cosmopolitiques*, 1997; *La sorcellerie capitaliste*, 2004; *La vierge et le neutrino*, 2006) and Whitehead's renewal of speculative philosophy (*Penser avec Whitehead*, 2002). Moving James's work away from the references informing the readings of Habermas, Rorty and Putnam (Austin, Wittgenstein, Davidson), the essay engages a broader set of philosophies of relation that tackle the limitations of critical philosophy and display a reflexive attentiveness to what it is that philosophy does.**

of adjustment. Pragmatism explains everything about ideas except why a person would be willing to die for one.<sup>2</sup>

### Questions of engagement

Let us begin with the thematic point of view, that is to say the manner in which James links thought and choices that engage and expose. This link corresponds to what in *The Will to Believe* James calls 'genuine option'. Such an option is defined by the triple quality of being living, obliged and momentous.<sup>3</sup> For an option to be living, its two terms must provoke a willingness to act, that is to say be situated in a concrete bifurcation. Excluded, then, are the absurd choices invented for the needs of a philosophical argument, for example, or so as to place an interlocutor in difficulty. But not all bifurcations demand an option. Some can be avoided and do not oblige one to choose. And some have no importance. The choice that matters has the characteristics of the 'chance to be seized', which will not occur again; its stake must count and it must engage in an irrevocable manner.

This triple characterization is not at all a logical construction, for which one would have to verify the independence of the three requirements. They are

not independent, because James also writes that a hypothesis possesses the maximum of life if it engages irrevocably.<sup>4</sup> It is much more a matter of a proposition addressed to a concrete reader, a reader who James knows will try to escape, to think using abstract examples which neither oblige nor matter.

Now, among the options that don't oblige, James gives the example of accepting a theory – his, for instance – as true or rejecting it as false: if James and his ideas make no difference to me, the demand that I accept or reject his theory will collide with this indifference. On the other hand, James writes, the reader would be obliged to choose if one can say to him 'accept this truth or live without it', as is the case when a dilemma, without any possible way out, imposes itself. The question of the truth, then, is not situated in the true/false alternative, but poses the question of its efficacy, its possible power of breaking through indifference and of engaging and obliging one to choose. Now, and this is a leitmotif of the texts that I will examine here, nothing, as such, has this power. A dilemma only constrains if it gets a hold. To become truth, a truth 'calls' for this power to be conferred on it by those who will as a consequence accept the alternative: consent or refuse.

In other words, James does not attribute genuineness to an option 'in itself'. Such an option does not require the 'good will' of recognition, but an effort, the effort of allowing itself to be affected by that which it would be easy to turn one's back on, the effort of responding to that which demands a response, whether this response is consent or refusal. In this way, James confronts the reader who would be tempted by critical indifference to a genuine option. Either one attaches oneself to the 'theory', and tests its 'validity', or one accepts the path proposed. That is to say: one consents to the possibility that such a philosophical address requires an answer. Not an answer to the question of what engages the addressee, rather to a more crucial one: does he or she have the slightest idea of what an option that engages might mean?

It is more than probable that William James knew that most of his academic readers would refuse such a path. His casualness in relation to the rules of logical construction – as exemplified in his definition of a genuine option – may well manifest his indifference towards those who would flatten his argument out in order to control its validity. The power of a dilemma – accept this truth or live without it – is not the power of logic, and if the power of logic prevailed James knew that he would appear as a desperately confused and contradictory author anyway.

In fact, in a text where he describes the manner in which Bergsonian sympathy rejoins the point of view of a 'thing's interior doing', James describes very precisely the consequences of the lack of sympathy that intellectualist thinkers assimilate to rigour:

Place yourself similarly at the centre of a man's philosophic vision and you understand at once all the different things it makes him write or say. But keep up outside, use your post-mortem method, try to build the philosophy up out of single phrases, taking first one and then another and seeking to make them fit, and of course you fail. You crawl over the thing like a myopic ant over a building, tumbling into every microscopic crack or fissure, finding nothing but inconsistencies, and never suspecting that a centre exists.<sup>5</sup>

However, when it is a matter of reading James, 'placing oneself' doesn't have quite the same meaning as for the reader of Bergson. According to James, Bergson has a way of presenting things that 'seduces you and bribes you in advance to become his disciple. It is a miracle and he a real magician.'<sup>6</sup> He himself did not try to take his reader down a continuous path deprived of those accidents that break up the spell and attract the attention to the way in which the magician proceeds. Certainly Bergsonian attention is an effort, but an effort that scorns effort, an effort at opening, at availability for an experience which demands to be accepted as such, in its fluid and living truth. Jamesian truth, for its part, demands the accident, which alone can make the bifurcation felt, which doesn't make one accept but obliges one to hesitate, which doesn't engage by seduction, but requires that one consent or refuse.

When speaking of the *will to believe*, James deliberately takes up the old accusation according to which one only believes what one wants to believe. His argument about belief will not try to impose itself as if by its own power and the adhesion this power entails. He will not refute the subjectivist interpretation of belief but transform it into an option, challenging those who take it to live with it. While Bergson reserves effort for the struggle with words, which always mobilize rigid abstractions, we will see that James mobilizes these abstractions in the construction of dilemmas whose efficacy should be to trouble routine thought, and most notably routine academic thought, forcing choice against intellectualist evasion.

### The test of choice

That 'placing oneself in the centre' demands an effort, when it is a matter of James, is testified to by the manner in which his work can effortlessly be reduced

to a psychologizing interpretation. Thus Richard Gale has made the demand to 'have it all', to 'grab with gusto all we can' the centre of James's philosophy, along with his anguish when faced with the necessity of sacrificing certain possibilities of experience, not being able to actualize them all.<sup>7</sup> Didn't James himself confess, in the chapter of *Principles of Psychology* consecrated to 'The Consciousness of Self':

I am often confronted by the necessity of standing by one of my empirical selves and relinquishing the rest. Not that I would not, if I could, be both handsome and fat and well dressed, and a great athlete, and make a million a year, and be a wit, a *bon-vivant*, and a lady-killer, as well as ... a saint.<sup>8</sup>

It may well be that the conclusion of the text does not speak of anguish but of decision for one possibility: 'to make any one of them actual, the rest must more or less be suppressed. So the seeker of his truest, strongest, deepest self must review the list carefully, and pick out the one on which to stake his salvation'.<sup>9</sup> But the psycho-philosophical interpreter is free, for his or her part, to place the temptation to be everything, to refuse nothing at the centre and he or she will thus interpret James's effort as a symptom. To put it bluntly, James 'had a problem with the question of choice' and it is clearly understood that the interpreter does not have this problem, or if he does, it is part of his private life, and doesn't concern the reader.

Placing oneself at the centre, in the case of William James, is in one way or another to agree to accompany him in the operation which made him a thinker, the one who doesn't suffer the problem he has with choices but accepts being put to work and to the test by this question. 'We can and we may, as it were, jump with both feet off the ground into or towards a world of which we trust the other parts to meet our jump and *only so* can the *making* of a perfected world of the pluralistic pattern take place.'<sup>10</sup> Jumping off the ground, which the psycho-philosophical interpreter sticks to, transmutes the question of choice. It is no longer a worldly choice – what should one choose to be or do in this world? – but a choice for the world to which it is a matter of contributing. This choice doesn't only imply a world in the making; it affirms a world whose components are themselves indeterminate, whose 'perfectibility' depends on the jumper's trust that he may connect with 'other parts' that may become an ingredient in its fabric.

Jumping, trusting, eventually meeting: here we rediscover the contrast with Bergson, for whom the

experience of a choice to be made is not privileged, because even that which we live as a pause and a hesitation is always already caught up in a becoming in which pausing and hesitation can only participate. Buridan's Ass will never hesitate between two meadows, and Buridan himself, if he is thirsty, will not hesitate between two glasses of cold water. For Bergson, it is only afterwards that the terms of a choice can be analysed, in a static mode, as abstractly equivalent possibilities between which the self represents itself as having oscillated. Such an analysis belongs to common sense, as it is this common sense which is expressed in the *mise en scène* associating the free act with a choice between two possibilities that are defined, according to one's needs, as equivalent.

In contrast to this *mise en scène*, Bergson proposes the celebrated image of free action as a fruit that falls from the tree when it is ripe. Not that there is not any hesitation, but it is not the 'self' which hesitates: the self 'lives and develops by means of its very hesitations',<sup>11</sup> and it is the self which 'matures'. Whoever has chosen will certainly be able to represent himself at the moment of his choice, but he will not be able to 'retrace his steps' and escape the fact that his representation itself is caught up in the becoming which issues from what it reconstituted *a posteriori* as 'his' choice. As for foreseeing such a choice, it would mean following closely the unfolding experience of the one who will choose, reliving it in its slightest details. 'You thus reached the very moment when, the action taking place, there was no longer anything to be foreseen, but only something to be done.'<sup>12</sup>

'Only something to be done': for William James, who had to be born a second time, and for all those who today we label 'depressed', Bergsonian simplicity is out of the question. They have been told, and have said to themselves so many times, 'but just do something', whereas that is precisely what is impossible for them. To do something, in the full sense of the phrase, for them, would be to affirm that 'life is worth living', to decide to live against the real possibility of suicide. Jumping with both feet in this sense affirms what the plenitude of Bergsonian duration did not envisage – the possibility of an inability to choose, the experience of an impotent coming and going between abstract and sneering alternatives. Certainly one can repeat, with the psycho-philosophical interpreter, that William James had a problem with the question of choice that apparently Bergson did not have, but the contrast explains nothing. What matters is *the manner* in which James made of his problem the ground for his jump into thinking.

## Thinking 'before'

It is not a matter of affirming that William James attempted to construct the propositions that would have succeeded in activating the capacity to act, where the exhortations addressed to those who are incapable of acting previously failed. Rather, one can say that, like Artaud writing 'for' the illiterate, that is to say not for the sake of them but 'before them', under the test of their presence,<sup>13</sup> James writes 'before' the suicidal, before those who succumbed, whereas he had a second chance.

That is what I would like to call an 'ethics of thought'. Every thought is, in some way, a jump, an affirmation that there is something to think and that it can be thought. And it is so even if the thinker denies it, preferring rather to spit on those who remain on the ground, describing their voluntary servitude or denouncing life as an illusion: if thought is a jump 'towards', what comes to meet the one who jumps may be frightening. But even for a thinker who arrives at the conclusion that life is to be condemned, thought is still an affirmation of it. I will experiment with the hypothesis that when James is concerned, 'placing oneself in the centre' is not about understanding a 'vision' but an engagement, the engagement that the choice for life maintains the possibility of suicide as a genuine option. The power to jump and live will not make the suicide case wrong, nor any of those others beaten by life, whom James convokes in his texts. Thought will have to accept the constraint and the test of their presence.

Again, James does not address himself to the 'potential suicide' that he was. He addresses himself to his audience, Christians or agnostics, academics or pastors, as to those who live questions such as those of choice, free will, morality with a certain tranquillity, all reduced to the 'classic' questions of philosophy. And it is to such an audience, who without even knowing it are rich with a sense of the possible, which seems as natural to them as the air that they breathe, that he proposes a supposition borrowed from John Ruskin.

In the midst of the enjoyments of the palate and the lightnesses of heart of a London dinner-party, the walls of the chamber were parted, and through their gap the nearest human beings who were famishing and in misery were borne into the midst of the company feasting and free.<sup>14</sup>

It is a matter of making something of the experience of those who live in a world denuded of possibilities pass over into those who are 'rich in possibility', a matter of making them think in the presence of the 'whole army of suicides'. 'The plainest intellectual

integrity – nay, more, the simplest manliness and honor'<sup>15</sup> – ought to forbid the rich from denigrating their riches, from considering the enjoyment of the possible as 'normal'.

This is perhaps why in *The Dilemma of Determinism* James presents as inconclusive an analysis of decision 'as it is lived' which he calls 'psychological', but which is of a kind Bergson, for his part, would judge sufficient, together with those readers of James who privilege *Radical Empiricism* over the question of belief. It offers an interesting contrast with Bergson's analysis, a contrast which bears on what Deleuze, in *Difference and Repetition*, calls the syntheses of time: the 'self' charged with the continuity of the past for Bergson, the present of the living moment which decides on continuity for James.

To *yourselves*, it is true, those very acts of choice, which to me are so blind, opaque and external, are the opposites of this, for you are within them and effect them. To you they appear as decisions; and decisions, for him who makes them, are altogether peculiar psychic facts. Self-luminous and self-justifying, at the living moment at which they occur, they appeal to no outside moment to put its stamp upon them or make them continuous with the rest of nature. Themselves it is rather who seem to make nature continuous; and in their strange and intense function of granting consent to one possibility and withholding it from another, to transform an equivocal and double future into an inalterable and simple past.<sup>16</sup>

Produced ceaselessly, decision by decision, living moment by living moment, such a continuity may seduce, but it will only engage James when it can be 'de-psychologized', affirmed for everything which exists.<sup>17</sup> As psychological, it privileges in a unilateral manner those who 'know how' to decide, who enjoy the living moment, those 'rich' people who grant or withhold without qualms.

The question that James is seeking to resolve would be this then: how can one address those who are, one might say, profiteers of their psychological self-assurance, who profit from it as if it was normal, who are unshakable to the point that they can allow themselves not to pose the question of what it requires? How can they be led to think 'in the presence' of those for whom the present is empty of meaning, those who find themselves imprisoned in a labyrinth of sneering dilemmas? How is one to disturb a colleague who moves in an 'orderly' world and limits himself to selecting an aspect of it so as to put it to the test without himself being put to the test? Without the consequences of what he consents to or what he

refuses making him run any risks other than that of a counter-argument coming from an equally tranquil colleague?

### **Do you think what you affirm?**

How, for example, can one address those who seem capable of tranquilly affirming determinism – that is to say, the illusory character of that which we who are rich in possibilities live as choice? This question is important because it involves the question of the relation between the problem of knowledge and the problem of existence. The experience that ‘the dice are already cast’, that one is unable to change anything, to make any difference, is called despair. Certainly the Stoics made the absence of hope the path to an austere and demanding wisdom, but James’s colleagues are not Stoics. The determinism that they affirm is tranquil, and requires no effort because it demands not consent but rather refusal. For its partisans, determinism imposes itself starting from an alternative that they present as obligatory. The dilemma would be: either accept determinism as the requisite horizon of a rational comprehension of the world, or accept an arbitrary world, opaque to reason.

The Bergsonian category of the ‘false problem’ is unsuitable here because what is singular about determinism is the manner in which it is imposed. What dominates in this case is a pale ‘I know very well...’ – for example, as Bergson maintains, that it can never be verified by a correlative capacity for prediction, followed by a vibrant ‘but all the same!’: if we abandon determinism, we lose science, we endanger reason.

The fact that in *The Dilemma of Determinism* James chooses to tackle the problem starting from the question of chance clearly indicates that for him it is a matter of breaking a sort of spell that separates those who affirm determinism from the consequences of this affirmation. Breaking the spell implies the need to undo the alternative that gives determinism the power to impose itself, it implies discerning the force which nourishes it. And this force, such as it is diagnosed by James, is nothing other than the repulsion which the idea of ‘holes’ in the causal chain gives rise to, that is to say chance, assimilated to a ‘barefaced crazy unreason, the negation of intelligibility and law’.<sup>18</sup> Those who affirm determinism do not think what they affirm in the positive sense; their consenting to determinism is in fact a refusal of chance, a veritable hatred of chance. And it is this hatred that they spread when one takes seriously their threat: ‘determinism must be accepted, or else...’ It is thus on this terrible ‘or else’ that James will attempt to operate.

The choice of taking the side of chance is part of James’s ethics of thought. The means chosen for a problem must respond to this problem, without giving it a weight that it does not have. The question of chance, a Bergsonian false problem, is fitting precisely because it is not a matter of responding to the ‘belief in determinism’ with a ‘belief in chance’, just as it is not a matter of thinking ‘before’ those who are crushed by fate, but of addressing oneself to those colleagues who tranquilly affirm their determinist convictions. Their hatred of chance doesn’t demand that one opposes them with another truth, in the positive sense – that of our psychological experience, for example. This hatred must lose its grip, and making something lose its grip is what might be called an experimental operation: success or failure. The criterion is not one of truth but of efficacy: it is a matter for James of succeeding in making the absurd character of this panicky hatred of chance felt.

That is why William James will accept the image that Bergson refuses: that of the two routes that he can take indifferently in order to return home. One route having been taken, the determinist will affirm that it had to have been taken, and to claim the other could have been taken is to admit chance, irrationality, dementia, ‘a horrid gap in nature’.<sup>19</sup> The universe has always been such that it is the first route that had to be taken, that to take the second was an impossibility, even if, as Leibniz would maintain, no vision, but the infinitely acute vision of God, could have determined which was necessary, which impossible.

James does not maintain that the choice of routes was made ‘by chance’. This term is not a part of the experience of someone taking one or the other route, even if he tosses a coin to decide: the choice of tossing the coin will not itself be lived as the ‘fruit of chance’. Chance corresponds perfectly to the sort of vision ‘from the outside’ that Bergson refuses. But it is not a question here of posing the problem of vision but that of consent and refusal. Chance has a meaning only in relation to its refusal, and using the artificial simplicity of the thought experiment aims not at proving but at making sensible the suffocating experience of a world where everything conspires, where the most radical difference – necessity and impossibility – opposes two universes, each corresponding to the choice of one of the two routes. And this even though either of the two universes would have had every claim to being explained rationally, because both ‘spring equally from the soil of the past’.<sup>20</sup> Here, chance does not communicate with the disordered reign of chaos, terrible confusion, the frighteningly arbitrary, but only

with the sober affirmation that the route which was not taken could have been, that taking it was not an impossibility.

James has not 'proved' chance. Chance cannot be proved (even in quantum physics). He tried to convey the experience of the consequences of refusing chance if we took it seriously, if instead of linking it to a definition of rationality and its demands, we gave it a toehold in our lives. Are we capable of living in a world without real possibilities, that is to say of consenting to an experience that would signal to every psychiatrist a grave psychopathological state? In the name of what? We really do have the experience of ensembles whose parts are dissociated and are each determined with a certain independence, without the overall functioning evading all intelligibility.

'That the universe may actually be a sort of joint stock company ... in which the sharers have both limited liabilities and limited powers, is of course a simple and conceivable notion.'<sup>21</sup> If one explained to shareholders that they must recognize that they should admit their decisions to be the 'unconditional property of the whole', or else the fabric of the company would collapse, they would claim for these decisions what, according to James, must be accorded to every phenomenon which imposes itself on us as fortuitous. The shareholders would say 'hands off!',<sup>22</sup> 'do not treat us as hostages of the order of the whole, our decisions are ours.'

Chance signifies nothing other than this 'hands off!', this refusal of a block universe, where what happens would be controlled, guaranteed, necessitated by the rest. What happens can concord marvellously with the rest, without the latter having a positive, determining hold on the happening. Finally, the idea of chance is only the pejorative version of the idea of the gift: that to which we cannot lay claim as if it was a right. The fortuitous is not the inexplicable but that which comes 'when it comes, in the manner of a free gift, or not at all'.<sup>23</sup> And if the universe wishes to appropriate this gift, integrate it into its properties, it will certainly be able to, and the fortuitous will appear as perfectly intelligible. But it will be able to do so only after this fortuitous event has occurred.

### Chance and regret

The question of the two routes was a thought experiment destined to make the dilemma 'determinism or meaningless chance' lose its force and to prepare the terrain for another dilemma. The alternative that James wishes to render living, obligatory and momentous, bears on the consequences of the determinist doctrine. Think of a horrific crime of your choice. If you declare yourself a determinist, you must forbid yourself the 'judgement of regret' because one cannot comprehend the regret that such a crime took place 'without the admission of real, genuine possibilities into the world'.<sup>24</sup> And so you either accept the reality



of the possible or you declare that this crime was necessary and the regret that it took place subjective and a vector of illusion. But that is not yet enough: the same dilemma also forbids you from regretting that your contemporaries allowed themselves this error, since you will have to recognize that it too is necessary once it has occurred.

The long description of the crime of Brockton, whose horror James revives, is a fascinating element of the Jamesian operation. It is a matter of details that perhaps intellectualists will judge to be anecdotal. But if they affirm the illusory character of regret, they must be capable of affirming that the crime was determined by the order of things if not 'before' the unhappy woman who, shot with four bullets, asked her husband 'you didn't do it deliberately, did you, darling?'; in any case, before the self-satisfaction of the latter who said that he replied 'No, I didn't do it deliberately' as he picked up the rock with which he would smash her skull.

This moment of cruelty and terror must be rendered present because it has as its correlate the veritable cry of disgust and anger of James faced with the 'subjectivist proposition'. This proposition allows certain determinists to escape from pessimistic despair and to attribute a positive dimension to the crime and the sorrow to which it gives rise, as contributing to human progress: 'Crime justifies its criminality by awakening our intelligence of that criminality, and eventually our remorse and regrets; and the error included in our remorse and regrets, the error of supposing that the past could have been different, justifies itself by its use. Its use is to quicken our sense of *what* the irretrievably lost is.'<sup>25</sup> Let us be thankful for the Brockton murder because it finds its meaning by provoking in us moral or scientific judgements.

If *this* be the whole fruit of the victory, we say; if the generations of mankind suffered and laid down their lives; if prophets confessed and martyrs sang in the fire, and all the sacred tears were shed for no other end than that a race of creatures of such unexampled insipidity should succeed, and protract *in saecula saeculorum* their contented and inoffensive lives, – why at such a rate, better lose than win the battle, or at all events better ring down the curtain before the last act of the play, so that a business that began so importantly may be saved from so singularly flat a winding-up.<sup>26</sup>

James's cry is the correlate of the ethics of thought I have hypothesized, and should rule out the identification of pragmatism and utilitarianism. The acknowledged utilitarian value of regret, as subjective as it

may be, disgusts him, because it places the horror of the world at the service of those in the position of spectators, indeed even of consumers. The act of thinking evades what James calls the battle, the choice of affirming that the world has a meaning even when burning on the stake. The only meaning assigned to the horror of the crime is to add a little spice, provoking a judgement which revives the flavour of insipid goods, whose values lies only in the possibility that they could be irretrievably lost. The thinker does not think before the crime; he uses such a regrettable event in order to forge moral judgement or scientific explanations.

For James regret founds no judgement. To regret is not to condemn. Contrary to the imputation 'you should not have' that Kant demands we be able to apply unconditionally in order to impose the postulate of an unconditionally free transcendental subject, regret does not preclude the murderer's being irresponsible. What is more, regret is not in itself a secret preparation for the definition of what it is right to regret. The rapist who gets caught will regret not his attack but the fact that he didn't murder the victim who identified him. There is no cynicism here but an ethics of the problem. The purpose that gives its importance to the judgement of regret is not to address the choice of the battle or the meaning of life. It is nothing other than to dispel the power of determinism, and this power is not worthy of engaging a thinking bearing on evil, freedom, or responsibility: 'the word "chance", with its singular negativity, is just the word for this purpose. Whoever uses it instead of "freedom", squarely and resolutely gives up all pretence to control the things that he says are free. For *him* he confesses that they are no better than mere chance would be.'<sup>27</sup>

It is not a matter of affirming that the abominable gesture of the Brockton murderer is the product of chance – that would be to use chance in a positive way, as an explanation. Rather, faced with those who would like to take control, whether that be in the name of freedom or duty, or in the name of all the determinisms you like – genes, environment or passions – it is a matter of repeating the cry of the fortuitous event 'hands off!' Horror must, so to speak, remain open; the abyss of the last moments of the victim must not be filled up with scientific or moral judgements.

### The consent that engages

Thinking 'before' the last moments of the victim is also to pose the question 'is life worth living?', and this time not before the murdered wife, who never had to pose herself this question, but before those who replied

‘no’. There is a properly Jamesian ethic in the fact of avoiding every passage leading from regret, with its correlative, chance, to betting on a consent that engages *for this world*, full of blood, drama and fury, betting that this world does not confirm the suicides’ despair, just a matter of a confusion of stories told by idiots, signifying nothing.

Chance allows for games of chance, and the player will certainly regret that the roulette ball landed on the number just next to the one she had bet everything on, but the confidence that she had in her luck was addressed to a ‘free gift’ which comes when it comes or not at all. The bet, for its part, certainly requires that the outcome is not given – that is why a universe which is not a block has to be affirmed. But the bet must also affirm the Jamesian version of responsibility, a responsibility that is not moral – you ought not to have – but ‘existential’, one might say, because engagement makes its consequences exist. Whoever thinks that life signifies nothing, that chance is at the controls, will find only confirmation, and will say the suicides were right.

As for the option of trust – ‘Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help create the fact’<sup>28</sup> – it is undeniably backed up with examples corresponding to a utilitarian version of pragmatism. Notably the recurrent one of the mountaineer, forced to take a terrible leap, who will fall into the crevice if he doesn’t have the faith that he can accomplish it. However, it cannot be reduced to this. First, the mountaineer, experienced and trusting in his own means, can nevertheless fall into the crevice, because the rock that he trusted he would be able to reach was cracked, for example: chance is not eliminated by trust. Second, the mountaineer’s leap, the ‘faith that saves’, is only a pedagogical example, as all the other examples which have served to feed the myth of Jamesian pragmatism as the philosophy of the *cash* value of ideas. In fact because his trust in his capacities creates a disymmetry that concerns his survival, the mountaineer can be inscribed in the continuity of examples that bear on animal needs. The mountaineer needs to believe that he can succeed, like a goat seeking the slightest blade of grass on a deserted plateau.

Would the difference, then, be that whilst the goat’s faith seems indestructible, the mountaineer can doubt? This might take James into the vicinity of a Romantic ‘critique’ of thinking as that which doubts and corrupts the assured instincts of animal life. However, whenever James’s argumentation has a ‘biological’ stage, putting physiology and psychology or animal and human needs in continuity, it is always a matter of preparing the

terrain. To those who think that the continuity step risks giving a purely natural basis to values supposed to transcend nature, James replies that it is ‘an honest stage; and no man should dare to speak meanly of these instincts which are our nature’s best equipment, and to which religion herself must in the last resort address her own peculiar appeals.’<sup>29</sup> The continuity stage allows human needs to resist both censure and intellectualist hopes, but it is then a matter of posing the question of what these needs specifically require. They require... that there may be something that may come and meet those who jump off the solid ground of factual statements.

We are well equipped but that does not prevent doubt. On the contrary, whoever bets on life, for the world, engages in a fight whose outcome is uncertain. Perhaps he will succumb, and, worse still, because chance is always there, he is not in the slightest bit assured that his choice will not have catastrophic consequences. To think ‘before’ the whole army of suicides, it is not enough to accept the fight from which they subtracted themselves. The real bet must be able to conjugate trust and uncertainty. It must imply a jump towards what can make the fight for life a ‘real’ fight, where something is decided that exceeds the interests of the protagonists and requires them despite the uncertainty of the consequences. If the fight for life ‘be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the Universe by success, it is not better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will’.<sup>30</sup>

Consequently, faith is what is required against the ‘all is vanity’ opium of scepticism, but it should be underlined that it does not offer any of the assurances that would silence the sceptic. One should even say that the Jamesian ethic cannot consent to any of these assurances, not because it would spoil a pure or heroic faith but because assured thinking doesn’t think ‘in the presence of’. Assured thinking can only include in the same address those whom life has beaten and those who do not know how rich they are, condemning the former and making the latter right.

### **Tragedy and collective experimentation**

What I am calling James’s ethics of thought is not only a constraint that confers on this thinking its own style. In the case of ‘moral life’, it becomes the recipient of a solution to what might appear to be an insoluble dilemma. Here William James is addressing himself to moral philosophers who struggle with moral scepticism, with the claim that all morality responds to the



law of the most powerful. And he defines himself as participating in this struggle. But he begins by refusing to give to the philosophers what they think they need in order to beat scepticism – give me a fixed point and I will construct for you the complete system of human obligations and duties.

Not only does James refuse even the shadow of a fixed point, but his definition of the good – ‘the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand’<sup>31</sup> – seems destined to result in the relativism of every moral position. Not all demands can be met at the same time: they thwart and offend each other. Everyone is liable to construct a ‘moral world’ where he or she will be in the position of vindicating their right to oblige everyone else to submit to their demand, and the philosopher does nothing different when he confers a force of law on the ideal to which he aspires. Such, then, is the dilemma: either the philosopher actually vindicates this right in the name of an authority which nobody conferred on him, and thereby confirms that conflicting authority is the ultimate horizon of every definition of morality; or he accepts the obligation to reject his own spontaneous ideals, even those he cherishes most, and to examine conflicting claims impartially. But according to what criteria? With what unity is one to render conflicting aspirations commensurable?

It is there, at the moment when there seems to be no way out, that James transforms the problem. What rises up before the examiner, he writes, is ‘a tragic situation and no mere speculative conundrum’.<sup>32</sup> It is not a matter of searching for a criterion that would justify as normal the situation in which some demands or ideals are satisfied and not others. Genuine impartiality happens through the capacity to *feel the tragedy* that they cannot all be satisfied, that is to say through a resistance to the anaesthesia that our conventions give rise to.

If we follow the ideal which is conventionally highest, the others which we butcher either die and do not return to haunt us; or if they come back and accuse us of murder, every one applauds us for turning to them a deaf ear. In other words, our environment encourages us not to be philosophers but partisans.<sup>33</sup>

William James had nothing against conventions, quite the contrary. But it is to philosophers that he is addressing himself here, because philosophers always try to transcend conventions, to derive them from what ought to be in order to protect them from the accusation of deriving from what ought not to be – the arbitrary law of the most powerful, in this instance. Now, a convention is not ‘derived’. It is not reducible

to anything more general at all. To defend a convention against scepticism therefore is not for James to found it but to think of it as the solution to a problem that no sceptic could deny. What the Jamesian philosopher insists is to keep alive the memory of the problem to which moral conventions respond. That is to say, to think in the presence of ‘ghosts’, of all those muffled demands that insist on being heard although a convention excluded them.

This does not mean that the moral philosopher is the spokesperson of these ghosts, because to the extent that the problem is, tragically, inescapable, exclusion is not unjust. Instead James proposes a guiding principle that seems to indicate a possible solution: ‘to satisfy at all times as many demands as we can’. As a consequence:

those ideals must be written highest which *prevail at the least cost*, or by whose realization the least possible number of other ideals are destroyed. Since victory and defeat there must be, the victory to be philosophically prayed for is that of the more inclusive side – of the side which even in the hour of triumph will to some degree do justice to the ideals in which the vanquished party’s interests lay.<sup>34</sup>

But, knowing that the vanquished are innumerable, how can such a calculus work? Without having the means, should the philosopher occupy the position of Leibniz’s God, calculating the best of all possible worlds under the constraint of impossibility? Such a position is untenable not only because we are not God but for a positive reason: the ‘comprehensive’ character of an ideal – what it has to condemn in order to affirm itself – is an unknown. Is it remembered today that, for Catholics sixty years ago, refusing to let Jewish survivors of the death camps reclaim their children if they had been baptised seemed an unavoidable consequence of their faith?

What James proposes to moral philosophers is not to calculate, but to accompany him on an adventure that no ‘closet-solution’<sup>35</sup> can anticipate because it is only in real time that a winning ideal may come to answer the philosopher’s prayer – that is, become compossible with some of the demands it excluded. This will not happen through the good will of the winners who would listen to the advice of a philosopher. If the winners can learn to modify their demands, it is because these demands have been put to the test, and because this test has succeeded in having their abusive character felt. This test begins every time that an excluded ideal ‘has its special champion already provided in the shape of some genius expressly born to feel it, and to fight to death in its behalf’.<sup>36</sup>

Certainly the philosopher can become such a champion, but then he will have to refrain from founding the demand for which he is the spokesperson on an authoritative philosophical argument. He is engaged in a 'real battle' at the side of others who similarly denounce what excludes them as an abuse of power. And the result of this battle cannot be defined by thought, because the possible victorious outcome will not be only the suspension of an abusive arbitrariness. What will be invented is a new composition of the world, implying the concrete modification of those components that had claimed the necessity of excluding what they finally come to admit.

What James envisages is a link between morality and a large-scale collective experimentation, the making of connections between what was mutually exclusive, the results of which can only be judged *a posteriori* 'by finding, after the fact of their making, how much more outcry or how much appeasement comes about'.<sup>37</sup> Such a link has nothing relativistic about it. One could even say that it requires that those collectives confronted with the demands of those they exclude not be 'demoralized', ready to give way to every demand. Appeasement testifies to an event, and, if it was produced instead by the relativistic understanding that no demand should impose anything on anyone, there would then be no 'gain', no apprenticeship, only the sadness of renunciation.<sup>38</sup>

### Keeping doors and windows open

Moral philosophers are called to bracket off their demands, whether they coincide or enter into conflict with those that make innovators act and struggle, because of their very engagement, because a trust in the collective making of history is the only way to escape moral relativism. The role of trust is not a matter of the powerlessness of the individual, of his incapacity to envisage the transformations that only such a history is capable of producing. It is rather because such transformations are a matter of fighting, involving the very fabrication of the world, not a matter of knowledge, which is always relative to a given moment of its fabric. The situation is similar in the case of biological evolution, where there can be no theory of adaptation, only retroactive comments.

However, the analogy with evolution might give rise to scepticism again, because biological evolution doesn't follow any 'guiding principle', giving meaning to a 'better' world. That is why it is important to underline that in the case of morality the stake is not the selection of the best adapted, the victory of some and the elimination of others. The stake is the invention

of new modes of composition, maximizing the possibilities for coexistence of what in every epoch seem destined to exclude each other. And the stimulus to this collective history is not 'new ideas', similar to random mutations. It is what a social organization excludes which comes back to haunt it and which, sometimes, gives rise to spokespeople capable of imposing the collective test or experiment which will, maybe, produce a better world.<sup>39</sup>

'Keep the doors and windows open': James's affirmation of this urgency, which the psycho-philosophical commentator has interpreted as the search for a way to 'have it all', could indeed effectively be the centre of James's thinking, but in the manner of an engagement, not a symptom. Keeping the doors and windows open is a constraint on thinking. It does not only demand that the thinker leave the solid ground of agreed human conventions, which affirm the legitimacy of certain possibilities and condemn others. In order to leave this ground, it also demands that the thinker not aim at what would transcend the conventions that give its consistency to this ground. The moral philosopher's jump is not towards an ideal that would ratify the legitimacy of some demands and the condemnation of others. What I have called an 'ethics of thought' responds to this strange jump, which nevertheless has nothing to do with levitation. It means jumping off a ground silencing the ghosts of those who have been sacrificed, refusing to ratify their condemnation or to define their destiny as 'normal' in the name of some generality (genes, the environment, etc.). Such a jump is not a 'moral one' because it is not a matter of a demand but of a test. Correlatively, what James jumps towards has nothing to do with a morality of the beyond, which would promise redemption to the sacrificed, which would punish the unspeakable Brockton murderer and console his unfortunate victim. The 'invisible' world that he sometimes invokes, when it is a matter of denying that the world of facts has the last word, does not for its part have the final word. It is not another world, where suicides would be reconciled with eternal life, a world where what has cruelly, irreversibly, taken place could be undone. The jump is not made into a world that would welcome and justify. It may even be the case that the 'invisible' which may come to meet the jumper vitally needs the jumper. Jumping demands a 'fidelity' to *our* world, placed 'between barbarism and freedom',<sup>40</sup> and 'God himself, in short, *may* draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity.'<sup>41</sup>

Living demands courage for whoever has hesitated – really hesitated – between living and dying, for

whom this has been a genuine option and who refuses to forget it, to turn his or her back on the one who hesitated, by retroactively transforming consent into a norm and refusal into a weakness. Courage is a recurrent theme in James because it is what every genuine option depends on. But because in his case the choice of living was equally the choice of thinking, not of taking part, not of devoting his life to a particular cause, to a demand which fights to have its legitimacy recognized, this courage destined James to the thinking of consequences that he called ‘pragmatism’. Pragmatism: a thinking that accepts as a constraint the exclusion of every idea that implies, among its consequences, a transmutation of *our* reasons into *Reason*, into what should have been valid also for those who disregarded it and chose not to live.

This is probably why James has disappointed, if not those who are engaged in a cause, then those who live off the rent of the engagement of others. Doubtless that is why his pragmatism exposed itself to the accusation that it ‘degrades’ ideas by taking away from them their claim to a truth independent of their consequences, indeed even by linking them to what they can ‘yield’.

**Translated by Andrew Goffey**

## Notes

1. The original version of this article was published as ‘William James: une éthique de la pensée?’ in Didier Debaise, ed., *Vie et expérimentation: Peirce, James, Dewey*, Annales de l’institut de Philosophie de l’Université de Bruxelles, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, Paris, 2007. The translation is published here with the kind permission of J. Vrin.
2. Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, New York, 2001, p. 375. I have chosen this author because the misunderstanding is all the more remarkable given the way that the book shows the role that the American Civil War, undertaken in the name of a noble idea but that led to carnage and the destruction of a world, played for the generation of thinkers Menand associates with pragmatism.
3. William James, ‘The Will to Believe’, in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, Longmans, London, 1897, p. 3.
4. Ibid.
5. William James, ‘Bergson and his Critique of Intellectualism’, in *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1977, p. 577.
6. Ibid., p. 562.
7. Richard M. Gale *The Divided Self of William James*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.
8. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 1, Henry Holt, New York, 1927, p. 309; available at [www.psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/Principles/index.htm](http://www.psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/Principles/index.htm).
9. Ibid., p. 310.
10. William James, Appendix to *Some Problems in Philosophy*, Longmans, London, 1911, p. 230.
11. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, Harper & Row, New York, 1960, p. 176.
12. Ibid., p. 189.
13. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, Verso, London, 1994, p. 109.
14. John Ruskin, cited in William James ‘Is Life Worth Living?’, in *The Will to Believe*, p. 37.
15. Ibid.
16. William James, ‘The Dilemma of Determinism’, in *The Will to Believe*, p. 158.
17. Readers familiar with Whitehead won’t be able to help thinking that he had read the passage I have just cited when choosing the term ‘decision’ to designate the process of self-determination of every actual entity.
18. James, ‘The Dilemma of Determinism’, p. 153.
19. Ibid., p. 156.
20. Ibid., p. 157.
21. Ibid., p. 154.
22. Ibid., p. 154.
23. Ibid., p. 154.
24. Ibid., p. 175.
25. Ibid., p. 165.
26. Ibid., p. 168.
27. Ibid., p. 180.
28. Ibid., p. 62.
29. Ibid., p. 51.
30. Ibid., p. 61.
31. William James, ‘Moral Philosophers and the Moral Life’, in *The Will to Believe*, p. 201.
32. Ibid., p. 203.
33. Ibid., p. 203.
34. Ibid., p. 205.
35. Ibid., p. 207.
36. Ibid., pp. 207–8.
37. Ibid., p. 207.
38. In *Science and The Modern World*, Whitehead affirmed that religion would only get its moral authority back if religious thinkers stopped opposing new situations as if it was a vital matter only to congratulate themselves, after their defeat, on the new depth acquired by religious intuition. It was a question for religion of envisaging change in the same manner as science. Here too this did not signal relativism, since change in science needs active and demanding controversies. Between relativism and certainty, Whitehead, like James, envisages protagonists able to cultivate an art of hesitating which affirms a more important stake than that of knowing who is right and who is wrong. See Isabelle Stengers, *La Vierge et le neutrino*, Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, Paris, 2006.
39. Cf. Bruno Latour, *The Politics of Nature*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2004; and what I call a (political) culture of interstices, in Isabelle Stengers *Penser avec Whitehead*, Seuil, Paris, 2002.
40. James, ‘Is Life Worth Living?’, p. 61.
41. Ibid. This supposition was taken up again by Whitehead, whose God doesn’t transcend the world without being transcended by it in turn, and whose experience Whitehead defined by a ‘yearning’ for actual responses that he can neither command nor anticipate. Even if it is for completely different reasons, God, according to Whitehead, can no more anticipate how the world will produce new contrasts able to affirm together what had seemed contradictory than could the thinker meditating in the shadows of his chamber. This is the stake of the new Jamesian composition of the moral world taken to the level of a cosmic stake.