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## Pure Experience and Nomadism in James and Deleuze<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

William James and Gilles Deleuze gave two specific definitions of their own ways of thinking: James used the expression “radical empiricism”, whereas Deleuze wrote about “transcendental empiricism”. In both cases, empiricism is brought out as the main feature of their perspective on reality. The common reader could find it quite weird, since one usually thinks about a pragmatist James, linked to the Anglo-Saxon tradition and with only a few elements in common with Continental philosophy. On the other hand, when one refers to Deleuze, empiricism is not usually the first definition of one’s thought: the focus is upon repetition and difference, upon vitalism, the idea of otherness, and the political connotation of his essays, written together with Guattari. However, a more careful reading of Deleuze’s works brings out something else, an undercurrent<sup>2</sup>, which is a stream of pure experience preceding every distinction between subject and object, material and unmaterial, I and Other. David Lapoujade, for instance, brings James away from the limitations of a purely Anglo-Saxon pragmatism and considers him a precursor of Deleuze (Lapoujade 1997). A “dark precursor” (Deleuze 1968; eng. trans. 1994, p. 147), may be said according to *Difference and Repetition*, since James is not mentioned very often by Deleuze, especially in his mature and later works, unlike other authors (Duns Scotus, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Heidegger, etc.). However, it is well known that the dark precursor, the *dispars*, is what lays on the ground of difference and anti-constitutively constitutes its roots. In the same way, James is the dark precursor of Deleuze, the one who lays on the ground of his thought, both in *Difference and Repetition* and his other essays, especially *The Logic of Sense* and his last work, entitled *Immanence: A Life...*

<sup>1</sup> This essay was born as a talk for the seminar of aesthetics “Transcendental Empiricism and Absolute Experience”, held at the University of Udine on 9 September 2020.

<sup>2</sup> According to the interpretation of Rocco Ronchi, the history of philosophy can be read according to a double canon, an official and a hidden one (Ronchi 2017).

It should be asked in what sense James constitutes “the bottomless” (Deleuze 1968; eng. trans. 1994, p. 347) bottom of Deleuzian philosophy. I will show that both authors share an empiricist background, regarding especially the concept of “pure experience”. Furthermore, I will bring out that Deleuze, even if he shares the same starting point of James’s philosophy, shifts the axis of repetition according to difference: he develops his perspective on pure experience through a redefinition of the transcendental, inspired by the Spinozian immanentism and deconstructed through the *hybris* exalted by Nietzsche. Repetition is nourished by an ontological conception based not on analogy, but on univocity, which does not level singular beings onto an all-embracing identity, but nomadically distributes being as such, overthrowing every kind of ontological hierarchies.

### 1. The concept of “pure experience” in James’s writings

For this purpose, one should understand the meaning of pure experience in James’s works. Here is the definition he uses in the essay “Does Consciousness Exist?": “The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the ‘pure’ experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality or existence, a simple that” (James 1996, p. 23). It is a field, through which the present I am living at this instant takes shape; as long as it remains pure, it is “unqualified actuality or existence”, “a simple *that*” which cannot be precisely defined, a spirit which is also matter, a subject who is also an object, an I who is also another: it seems to refer to the Absolute of Idealism, however it is not definable as a universal Subject, but as an undifferentiated identity of subjects and objects. It is a finite version of Schelling’s entity (Lapoujade 1997, pp. 178-195), with some points in common with Fichte’s and Gentile’s I, but without any subjective and self-conscious features. This interpretation is corroborated by James’s words, when he states:

the sum total of all experiences, having no context, can not strictly be called conscious at all. It is a *that*, an Absolute, a ‘pure’ experience on an enormous scale, undifferentiated and undifferentiable into thought and thing. [...] In these respects the pure experiences of our philosophy are, in themselves considered, so many little absolutes, the philosophy of pure experience being only a more comminuted *Identitätsphilosophie* (James 1996, p. 135).

The fact that James writes about radical empiricism as a comminuted version of the philosophy of identity is particularly interesting. James

does not reject idealism, which is usually considered as the great opponent of empiricism, but he borrows the idea of absolute from it. However, unlike idealist philosophers, he refuses a subjective view and pays a greater attention to the finite, to the individual intersections which contribute to the formation of pure experience. What does James mean by “philosophy of identity”? My hypothesis is that he refers to an ontological identity, where singularities subsequently (not at the level of time, but of being) tend to identify. According to James, one should not make any distinction between two substances, a bodily and a spiritual one, so much that pure experience is constituted by a “primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed” (James 1996, p. 4)<sup>3</sup>: the author is talking about ontological monism, which still allows the development of perspective pluralism. The stream of pure consciousness, which can be experienced only in some cases (newborn perception, hallucinatory states due to drugs, disorders, traumas, etc.<sup>4</sup>), is an undifferentiated stream, a *that* which is ready to be everything and will be defined as a specific *what*. It is a continuous stream, “full both of oneness and of manyness, but in respects that don’t appear” (James 1996, pp. 93-94), not a potentiality needing to become actuality, but pure actuality, the virtual one, waiting to be defined along multiple directions. From the point of view of the same individual (or, better, the same single), experience tends to take shape along two main lines: the subjective and the objective ones, the representing and the represented ones (James 1996, p. 23). It is the same portion of experience, which is considered from two different perspectives, so that there is no distinction between separate entities, but only between functions. James is a thorough anti-dualist. Moreover, if the same mind can experience reality in two different ways, why should not be multiple perspectives belonging to different minds? The philosopher uses the image of a point (James 1996, pp. 12, 126), which constitutes a common experience for multiple subjects: it continues along a main line or another, however it may happen that, at a precise moment, different minds have the same experience. It is the same object, seen from a different view (James 1996, p. 125)<sup>5</sup>.

Jamesian perspectivism is not a kind of idealism not only for the non-

<sup>3</sup> According to Lapoujade, James refers to a “vague monism”, indicating the indefiniteness of experience, which cannot be defined either as material or as spiritual (Lapoujade 1997, p. 27).

<sup>4</sup> James 1996, p. 93.

<sup>5</sup> Some analogies with Husserlian phenomenology can be found, since James writes about the body of the other person as a percept in my field, showing analogies with the perception of my body. The thesis of the coterminality of minds may be considered, in this respect, a precursor of a better defined concept, called *Paarung* by Husserl in his *Cartesian Meditations* (Husserl 1950; eng. trans. 1960, §51).

subjectivity of pure experience, but also for another reason: if one of more minds were destroyed, that specific portion of experience would remain intact (James 1996, p. 45), because the objects they have in common would be intact as well. A kind of perspective realism is developed, giving value to the experiential tissue and to the multiplicity of visuals on the same object (Reck 1967). This illustrates in what way James writes about radical empiricism, a kind of thought which “must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. [...] [A] real place must be found for every kind of thing experienced, whether term or relation, in the final philosophical arrangement” (James 1996, p. 42). According to James, reality coincides with experience, which is directly grasped not by a single I, but by multiple subjects: perspectivism, through which a foundation of reality takes shape, should not be interpreted in a solipsistic, but in an intersubjective way. This illustrates why phenomenology and *Gestalt* psychology take an interest in Jamesian theory, which tries to go beyond the opposition between realism and idealism, giving value to immediateness as the common ground of all the singular experiences and their relationality.

## 2. Pure experience and ontological nomadism in Deleuze's thought

The foundation of the subjective *Erlebnis* on an absolute of pure experience allows to understand the reason why Deleuze, inspired by James, defines his thought as “transcendental empiricism”.

What is a transcendental field? It can be distinguished from experience in that it doesn't refer to an object or belong to a subject (empirical representation). It appears therefore as a pure stream of a-subjective consciousness, a pre-reflexive impersonal consciousness, a qualitative duration of consciousness without a self. It may seem curious that the transcendental be defined by such immediate givens: we will speak of a transcendental empiricism in contrast to everything that makes up the world of the subject and the object (Deleuze 1995; eng. trans. 2001, p. 25).

Beyond singular experiences, there is a stream of pure consciousness, preceding the constitution of subjectivity and the mediacy of reflection: it is a “consciousness without a self”<sup>6</sup>, which does not either belong to a sub-

<sup>6</sup> An analogy with Sartre's *Transcendence of the Ego* may be found: the author separates I from consciousness, releasing the latter from the cage of an Husserlian transcendental structure and from the ego who should live in it. Sartre shows that, beyond the cogito, there is a primordial unreflexive consciousness (Sartre 1936; eng. trans. 1960, p. 31).

ject or refer to an object. It is the pure and immediate experience referred to by James, an experience which is the essential condition for the generation of every subjective perspective: it is the experience par excellence, the condition of all the real experiences and, in this respect, what is genuinely transcendental.

Deleuze interprets James in this way, bringing out from his writings what the latter had not made explicit, that is the transcendental of pure experience. Deleuze seems to refer to Kant and, consequently, to Husserl: they certainly inspire his thought, however their way to conceive the transcendental does not satisfy the author of *Difference and Repetition*. In this book, Deleuze criticizes Kant, writing that he “traces the so-called transcendental structures from the empirical acts of a psychological consciousness” (Deleuze 1968; eng. trans. 1994, p. 171; Deleuze 1995; eng. trans. 2001, pp. 26-27)<sup>7</sup>. According to Ronchi, this means that it is a “ground in the image of the grounded”<sup>8</sup>, namely structures of the empirical I.

The same criticism is directed to Husserl, whose transcendental I is mainly characterized by intentionality (Husserl 1913; eng. trans. 1982, §84): the phenomenological method consists in leading back to the structure, through an analysis of the modes of intentionality itself. In this respect, the transcendental I is not separable from the empirical I and knows itself starting from the *Erlebnis* of the inquirer. Even the passive synthesis, which brings Husserl’s position closer to Deleuze’s one, is not radical enough to lead to a different way to conceive the transcendental, beyond subjectivity and consciousness (Husserl 1966; eng. trans. 2001; Treppiedi 2016, p. 3; Ronchi 2014, p. 43). After all, Husserlian position is an idealism of experiential conditions, therefore the subject is the basis of whatsoever operation. This aspect, which is positively seen by those who share an egological perspective, is criticized by Deleuze, who has a more radical idea of the transcendental: the latter is the condition not only of the object of experience, but also of the subject. Deleuze deeply changes the concept of transcendental, distorting it (Sauvagnargues 2010, p. 32), decentralizing the “who”: it is not the I anymore, but the general “They”, the “abominable Neuter stigmatized by every existential philosophy”<sup>9</sup>, the impersonal laying under the processes of subjectivation.

This process is characterized by the simultaneous rise of the two po-

<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding this, Descombes thinks that Deleuze is fundamentally post-Kantian (Descombes 1979, pp. 178-195).

<sup>8</sup> In Italian “fondamento fatto a immagine del fondato” (Ronchi 2016, p. 27).

<sup>9</sup> In Italian “abominevole Neutro stigmatizzato da tutte le filosofie esistenziali” (Ronchi 2016, p. 27). Levinas defines it as the *il y a*, the impersonal from which the subject rises because of a separation (Levinas 1961; eng. trans. 1969, pp. 39, 44, 60, 117-118, 208, 177-279).

larities of subject and object, polarities which are not distinguished by an ontological, but by a functional difference: taking inspiration from James, Deleuze states that empiricism:

undertakes [...] the most insane creation of concepts ever seen or heard [...]. But precisely one which treats the concept as object of an encounter, as a here-and-now, or rather as an *Erewhon* from which emerge inexhaustibly ever new, differently distributed “here” and “nows”. Only an empiricist could say: concepts are indeed things, but things in their free and wild state, beyond “anthropological predicates” (Deleuze 1968; eng. trans. 1994, p. xix).

There is no difference between the way I perceive the object and the object itself. The Kantian issue of the thing in itself, beyond its phenomenal manifestation, is put in the wrong way according to Deleuze and every kind of radical empiricism. If there is no difference between concept and percept, perception turns out to be a creation of concepts, which does not depend from the free initiative of a universal I, just as Fichte and Gentile think<sup>10</sup>, but from an impersonal “they”, preceding the constitution of single egos. This creation of concepts happens in a non-place called *Erewhon* (Deleuze takes inspiration from the homonymous book by Samuel Butler, anagram of *nowhere*), that is Jamesian pure experience. Only in a place which is not a real place concepts are manifested “in their free and wild state”, in a pre-reflexive way, which occurs in the mode of repetition. Unlike identity, where occurs what is always the same, in repetition what repeats itself occurs through difference, following a concept of return which decentralizes its starting point. Taking inspiration from Nietzsche, Deleuze offers his personal interpretation of the eternal return, which is grounded on difference and repetition (Deleuze 1968; eng. trans. 1994, pp. 51-53): the renewed manifestation of the identical does not happen exactly in the same way, but slightly shifting the porte cochere of the instant.

This slight, infinitesimal shift takes place because of a differential, which Deleuze, inspired by Leibniz, introduces in repeated series: at this stage, it cannot be defined as a production of copies, but of simulacra, having no archetypes or originals to refer to (Deleuze 1968; eng. trans. 1994, pp. 81, 154-156, 333-334). For the Leibnizian Principle of Identity of the Indiscernibles (Leibniz 1962, Book II, Chap. XXVII, A VI, 6, pp. 230-231), two entites cannot be exactly identical: either they are different,

<sup>10</sup> This applies only to the earlier phase of Fichte’s thought. Deleuze thinks that, in the latter versions of the *Doctrine of Scientific Knowledge* (since 1804), there is room for an absolute immanence, an original life which flows on this side of consciousness, which is conceived as an external phenomenon of truth (Deleuze 1995; eng. trans. 2001, p. 27).

or they are the same thing. A difference between two things which are almost the same is made possible by the *dispar*, the infinitesimal which allows nature “not to make jumps”, the nullifying gap which permits the passage not from non-being to being, but from *being-this* to *being-that*.

However, this passage does not imply an analogical concept of being, by which the latter is present, in varying degrees, in singular beings: this is called by Deleuze a “sedentary nomos” (Deleuze 1968; eng. trans. 1994, p. 46), in which being is distributed under fixed and proportional determinations, just as private property. It is the ontological frame of Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics, which sees God as being in the highest degree and nature as sorted according to a quantity-based hierarchy (THOM. AQ., *De ente et ess.*, Chap. V; ARIST., *Met.* 1003a33). For Deleuze, whose models of thought are Duns Scotus and Spinoza, being distributes itself univocally:

the essential in univocity is not that Being is said in a single and same sense, but that it is said, in a single and same sense, of all its individuating differences or intrinsic modalities. Being is the same for all these modalities, but these modalities are not the same. It is ‘equal’ for all, but they themselves are not equal. It is said of all in a single sense, but they themselves do not have the same sense (Deleuze 1968; eng. trans. 1994, p. 45).

There is no partition of being based on specific criteria, even less on assumed hierarchies: every entity has the same ontological degree, since there are no such things as perfect or more relevant than others. In this respect, Deleuze refers to a different kind of power, which is not hierarchical, as the analogical one, but anarchical. It is not a peaceful process, but a rebellion on the side of singularities against the identical, a *hybris* that thought is required to acknowledge. It is now clear why Deleuze writes about “nomadic distribution” and “crowned anarchy” (Deleuze 1968; eng. trans. 1994, p. 47): there is neither sedentariness, in the sense of established relations, nor different grades of being. This does not include flattening differences, but preserving them: multiplicity inside equality, ensured by an immanentistic monism of Spinozian origin, which is a condition for realizing singular experiences. The individuating, which does not coincide with the individual, identifies the formation of singularities before the formation of the differences between species and genus (Deleuze 1968; eng. trans. 1994, pp. 48-49): Aristotelian *species infima* precedes its genera and even categories.

## Conclusion

Deleuze's attention to singularity has its roots in the Jamesian concept of the virtual, according to which pure experience is only virtually objective or subjective, but currently unqualified (James 1996, p. 23): the transcendental is not pure potency, but virtuality, in the sense that the singular experience is there before being individuated, in the immanence of its conditions. It is now clear the meaning of Deleuzian "pre-individual singularities" (Deleuze 1968; eng. trans. 1994, p. xix), of a difference which is preserved before individuation, representation, and conceptual generalization. As the philosopher writes in his last work, the "virtual is not something that lacks reality but something that is engaged in a process of actualization following the plane that gives it its particular reality" (Deleuze 1995; eng. trans. 2001, p. 31). This kind of virtuality coincides with nomadism, with the distribution of univocal being, free from hierarchies, capable of preserving differences through a process of repetition without a reference model. Therefore, in order to understand the meaning of being in Deleuze, one should refer to the category of the virtual, or better, according to the words of Badiou, "the nominal pair virtual/actual exhaust the deployment of univocal Being" (Badiou 1997; eng. trans. 2000, p. 43). Deleuze's transcendental empiricism aims, through reference to James and Spinoza, at redefining the actuality of the virtual, with the purpose of "preserving the concrete abundance of the experience still to come, bringing out a reality more full of newness than the mere domain of 'possible experience'"<sup>11</sup>. It is the reality of life, a processuality which is pure immanence and confers dignity to singularities, without trapping them into the cages of subjectivation or objectivation.

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<sup>11</sup> In Italian "preservare la ricchezza concreta dell'esperienza a venire, portando alla luce una realtà molto più gravida di novità rispetto al solo dominio dell'«esperienza possibile»" (Treppiedi 2013, p. 138).

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