

## From Transcendental Empiricism to Worker Nomadism: William James\*

DAVID LAPOUJADE

---

William James calls himself a radical empiricist. His philosophy is not, as it is widely believed, pragmatism, but rather empiricism. What does this mean: to be a radical empiricist? Deleuze and Guattari give us a definition in *What is Philosophy?*: “When immanence is no longer immanent to something other than itself it is possible to speak of a plane of immanence. Such a plane is, perhaps, a radical empiricism”.<sup>1</sup> Radical empiricism would therefore be an operation which consists in liberating immanence, returning it to its own movement. Deleuze refers to this operation as transcendental empiricism, whereby one establishes a plane of immanence, when the plane of immanence is determined as transcendental field.

If James at first calls himself a radical empiricist, rather than an empiricist, this is because his interest is not in experience as such but rather in *pure* experience. This is the name William James gives to the plane of immanence. His is a *radical* empiricism insofar as he does not recognise the given as conceived of by classical empiricists, who begin with an anarchic distribution of sensible *minima*-psychic atoms. Moreover, the plane of pure experience is still connected for the empiricist to the rapidly overcome, theoretical stage which is the *tabula rasa*; experience is pure insofar as he who undergoes it is himself pure of all experience: Adam, the newborn. There is of course another way of extracting a plane of pure experience which consists in repeating the Cartesian operation of doubt and suspending all the existential positions of naive belief -- all

---

\* This paper was first published in E. Alliez, ed., *Gilles Deleuze. Une vie philosophique* (Synthelabo, 1998) Thanks to the editor and the publisher for permission to translate it here.

<sup>1</sup>G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (Columbia, 1994), p.46.

transcendences. One thus comes back to Husserl's well-known formula from the Cartesian *Meditations*: “[The] beginning is the pure -- and, so to speak, still dumb -- psychological experience, which now must be made to utter its own sense with no adulteration. The truly first utterance, however, is the Cartesian utterance of the *ego cogito*”.<sup>2</sup> However, this doubt is always carried out according to an essential certainty of which it is the obverse. Inevitably, the moment comes when doubt reverses itself in order to establish as a first principle an “I think”, whose constitutive power [*puissance*] was already manifest in its power [*pouvoir*] of suspension.

“Pure” thus comes to mean something quite different. It is no longer said of personae without experience -- such as Adam or the newborn -- as was the case with classical empiricism, it is now said of a field purified by doubt of all matters relating to empirical psychology. Indeed, pure designates that which subsists after the reduction or “bracketing”. Pure is said of all lived experiences [*vécus*] considered from an immanent point of view. Thus there is a pure experience, but also a pure expression and a pure consciousness. This is the same operation one can already find in Kant, though carried out according to different principles and producing different results: pure designates the determination of forms independently of their empirical content [*matière empirique*]. The pure is identified with *a priori* forms in order to put matter on the side of the empirical, the conditioned, experience.<sup>3</sup> One begins with pure forms which are then necessarily filled by material contents or with essences which are then varied by examples. If phenomenology can legitimately be called transcendental, it is to the degree to which it repeats the Kantian procedure, but under a more complex form, less visible, for Husserl makes it less apparent that the empirico-transcendental doublet strictly maps onto the couple matter/form. Generally, pure therefore means that forms are set in a transcendental field, constituting themselves either in *a priori*, or in immanent lived experiences.

The descriptions that James gives of pure experience lead us to pose the following question: why have Kant and Husserl failed to examine the forms themselves? Why have they not examined them if the forms of the ego, the subject, the object, of imagination, of intentionality are pure? Can

---

<sup>2</sup>*Cartesian Meditations* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), §16, p.38-39.

<sup>3</sup>“...while the matter of all appearance is given to us *a posteriori* only, its form must lie ready for the sensations *a priori* in the mind, and so must allow of being considered apart from all sensation”. *Critique of Pure Reason* (Macmillan, 1929 [N. Kemp Smith tr.]), Transcendental Aesthetic, §1, B34/A20.

one place these forms in the transcendental field without further examination, without realising what they commit one to? The question seems all the more justified to the extent that these forms, though reorganised, extended or narrowed down, are each and every time doubled by the very empirical psychology from which one nevertheless is trying to escape.<sup>4</sup> Psychology is reproached for its empiricism and its naturalism when instead it should be attacked for drawing from these both bad forms and false distinctions. Everything happens as if the transcendental were a *purified* psychology. In a certain sense, for Kant as for Husserl, forms are pure insofar as they are forms -- a profoundly Aristotelian or Thomist presupposition.

Given these conditions, how can James hold to the concept of pure experience whilst nevertheless declaring his radical empiricism? Pure experience does not find expression in the ego of a pure consciousness. On the contrary, following what Deleuze writes in one of his denser texts *Immanence: A Life...*, one must begin with a world in which consciousness is not yet revealed though it is co-extensive with the entire transcendental field.<sup>5</sup> One cannot yet establish any distinctions within it: neither subject nor object. Likewise in James, one must begin from an unlimited field in which dualistic distinctions, physical world and psychic world, the world of thought and the world of matter, subject and object, have yet to be made, and in which they cannot be made without experience ceasing to be pure, without immanence being lost. It is the field of experience in its pure state. It is no one's field [*le champ de personne*], or rather it is not given for anyone. But, one will object, how can there be experience without a

---

<sup>4</sup>This aspect has been widely commented upon. It was emphasized for the first time by Sartre when he reproached Husserl for doubling a psychic I with a transcendental I (see *La transcendance de l'ego*, Vrin, I, A, p.19-20); later by M. Dufrenne in his pages on Kant's tracing [*décalque*] of the faculties of Hume's empirical psychology and on Husserl's formalism. See *La notion d'a priori*, PUF. On the Kantian tracing, p.20-21. On the primacy of form in Husserl, p.90-91;94. Lastly, it is in Deleuze's texts that we find the proposal to establish a transcendental empiricism which would not be traced from empirical forms, which is but another way of saying that immanence must not be referred to anything but itself. See *Difference and Repetition* (Columbia, 1994), p. 143-144.

<sup>5</sup>*Theory, Culture & Society* 1997 Vol. 14(2), p.3: "...as long as consciousness crosses the transcendental field at an infinite speed which is everywhere diffuse, there is nothing that can reveal it. It expresses itself as fact only by reflecting itself onto a subject which refers it to objects. This is why the transcendental field cannot be defined by the consciousness which is nonetheless coextensive with it, but withdraws from all revelation."

consciousness or a subject which undergoes it? Must one not posit at least larval forms of subject and object? Does not James indeed remark that pure experience “*is* conscious, and it is *what* we are conscious of”?<sup>6</sup> Experience must therefore be understood in a very general sense: pure experience is the ensemble of all that which is related to something else without there necessarily being consciousness of this relation. One finds something of this usage of the term “experience” in the common expression “to have an experience”,<sup>7</sup> for example, the experience of crystallisation between chloride and sodium. We are certainly the ones having the experience, but the experience is not said of us, it is said of the things in relation: it is the chloride and sodium which crystallise; it is they which can therefore rightly be said to be undergoing the experience of crystallisation. Insofar as it is pure, experience can be said both of “subjects” and of “objects” (in a manner of speaking of course, since at this level we are dealing with neither). One must start from a field in which experience is virtually subjective or objective, indifferently mental or physical, but also primitively neither one nor the other. This means that one must free the flux of experience from the categories with which it is traditionally partitioned. In this sense, we are truly dealing here with pure experience. Pure does not mean pure of all matter, but pure of all form. Or rather, it points to an intermediary reality outside of any matter/form relationship.

What radical empiricism challenges -- and that which constitutes the basis of Kant’s and Husserl’s transcendental philosophies -- is the hylemorphic schema. James had already set himself a similar objective with regards to psychology: to free the flux of consciousness, the famous *stream of consciousness*, from the forms of traditional psychology. Nevertheless, James does not seek to reverse the primacy of form over matter in order to allow a free, sensing matter [*matière sensitive libre*] to flow in the manner of the empiricists. Independently of this relationship, there is an intermediary reality which deploys itself, neither matter nor form, out of which both psychic and physical reality are made. What is this intermediary reality? “There is, writes James, only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed and...we

---

<sup>6</sup>*Manuscript Essays and Notes* (Harvard University Press, 1988), p.18, 4. #4459.

<sup>7</sup>Trans. note: the French *faire une expérience* means both ‘to have an experience’ and ‘to carry out an experiment’.

call this stuff “pure experience”<sup>8</sup>. The plane of immanence is not a matter but a *material*. Now, material does not allow itself to be conceived according to a matter/form relationship, no more than it can be said to be contained within the categories subject/object, matter/thought, etc. It is directly physical-mental. Material is neither Matter, nor Thought, though it is the fabric [*tissu*] of both.

Indeed, material is not matter and neither is it the unformed. It is already traversed by relations, like a fabric traversed by fibers, by lines. The image of a fabric recurs constantly in James. There is a fabric of pure experience -- Deleuze and Guattari themselves write: “the plane is ceaselessly being woven like a gigantic shuttle.”<sup>9</sup> Just as for them the plane of immanence is defined as the “unlimited One-All”,<sup>10</sup> in James pure experience is presented as a “vague monism”.<sup>11</sup> The term monism should not lead us astray: we are really dealing here with a pluralism, albeit still a virtual one, The world of pure experience appears as a fabric of interlaced, superimposed relations, of telescoped events. We can even see this as the properly empiricist image of chaos, of a boundless number of possible and virtual relations (a bit like in Hume, when he places chaos in the imagination and formulates its general principle: anything may produce anything whatsoever).

Nevertheless, these relations and these events are indeed still virtual; they must still be undergone in *an* experience. That which distinguishes experience from pure experience is precisely the actualisation of these relations in the material itself. Experience is a path, or a series of paths, which follows a relative number of relations. If consciousness reveals itself to be a flux, it is because it is always in the process of following lines, of creating its own paths.

Thus, according to a *first dimension*, the process of cognition consists of following the lines, the virtual relations inscribed in the material, that is to say, it consists of creating both a path and the multiple dimensions of

---

<sup>8</sup>*Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Harvard University Press), p.4. In his study on Leibniz and the Baroque, Deleuze shows, through the work of Dubuffet, that Leibniz substitutes a material-force relationship for a matter-form relationship. “Matter that reveals its texture becomes raw material, just as form that reveals its folds becomes force. In the Baroque the coupling of material-force is what replaces matter and form (the primal forces being those of the soul).” G. Deleuze, *The Fold* (Minnesota, 1993), p.35.

<sup>9</sup>*What is Philosophy?* , p.38.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p.35.

<sup>11</sup>*Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Harvard University Press), p.113.

this path. The first element is the line or series constituted by cognition, going from a relative first term to a temporary conclusion. Cognition is ambulatory. James opposes two types of cognition: saltatory and ambulatory. In the former, one starts from the immanence of a subject that must, as it were, leap over itself within an Absolute or on a transcendental field in order to relate the object to itself. Saltatory cognition proceeds in this fashion because it empties series of their intermediaries.<sup>12</sup>

James replaces this type of cognition with another whose nature is precisely to traverse, each and every time, the entire series of intermediaries, or contract it into a habit: we are here dealing with so-called ambulatory cognition. As James says, “My thesis is that the knowing here is made by the ambulation through the intervening experiences ... Intervening experiences are thus as indispensable foundations for concrete relation of cognition as intervening space is for relation of distance. Cognition, whenever we take it concretely means ‘determinate’ ambulation”.<sup>13</sup> Thus one will refer, by convention, to the first term of a series as subject and to the point of arrival as object, but by contraction *only*, without thereby ignoring the intermediaries which come to gain their own consistency.<sup>14</sup> To refer to this process as ambulatory does not mean that cognition is necessarily prey to errancy, but rather that it moves from next to next, by successive links, following expressions that recur constantly in James. To know is to traverse the relations that permeate pure experience. To know is to survey -- like in the section of *A Thousand Plateaus* on the war machine, where Deleuze and Guattari, taking their lead from Simondon, show that the artisan is not caught in a matter/form relationship, but instead *follows* a materiality which he modulates.<sup>15</sup> The first image is that of the artisan as surveyor, who does not

---

<sup>12</sup>“For we first empty the idea, object and intermediaries of all their particularities, in order to retain only a general scheme, and then we consider the latter only in its function of giving a result, and not in its character of being a process [...] In other words, the intermediaries which in their concrete particularity form a bridge, evaporate ideally into an empty interval to cross”. *The Meaning of Truth* (Harvard University Press, 1975), p.81.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p.80-81.

<sup>14</sup>The relative independence of intermediate terms is one of the essential traits of Deleuze and Guattari’s nomadism. “A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the intermezzo.” G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minnesota, 1987), p.380.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p.412. One will note that this materiality is defined in similar terms to the ones used by James to describe material.

stop being an artisan to become a worker unless the perambulation which follows the movement and variations of the material, in what Deleuze and Guattari call the “machinic phylum”, is interrupted. In this sense, to follow “material” lines is to detect the functions that they contain, to make the material itself function. James thus replaces a matter/form schema with a material/function schema.

It is when we ask ourselves how the lines themselves are formed that a *second dimension* appears. For the lines are so many bridges that must be built from one term to a next. As James remarks, “The idea however doesn’t immediately leap the gulf, it only works from next to next so as to bridge it, fully or approximately”.<sup>16</sup> Ambulation moves from next to next by successive linkages. Knowledge [*connaissance*] grows through the addition of fragments. The second element, after the line, is thus the fragment [*morceau*]. Through the following of lines, consciousness is both constructed and reveals itself. But it also does so by seizing upon fragments and linking them together. Consciousness is a flux, but a flux that never ceases to contract itself into fields or “pulsations”, which hold together the elements of perception, volition, emotion, and thought. A fragment is just such a field, which is both self-consistent and self-coalescent. Perceptions, thoughts and emotions are treated as fragments. The flux of consciousness is like a parade of fragments, heterogeneous in their motifs, homogeneous in their fabric. The textile matter of pure experience is composite. Though continuous and homogeneous, it is nevertheless the case that it consists of fragments linked to each other in different ways.

Quite obviously, we find here Deleuze’s definition of American pragmatism as *patchwork*. As we read in *Critique et Clinique*, in the essay on Melville: “Not even a puzzle, whose pieces when fitted together would constitute a whole, but rather a wall of loose, uncemented stones, whose every element has value in itself but also in relation to others (...), not a uniform piece of clothing but a Harlequin’s coat, even white on white, an infinite patchwork with multiple joinings... the American invention *par excellence*, for the Americans invented patchwork, just as the Swiss are said to have invented the cuckoo clock.”<sup>17</sup> There is a “fabric” [*éttoffe*] of experience. Consciousness literally consists in constructing a patchwork; it works in fragments. This is why James constantly invokes an experiential tissue as textile material. We sew or stitch the fragments of our experience

---

<sup>16</sup>*The Meaning of Truth*, VII, p.264.

<sup>17</sup>*Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minnesota, 1997), p.86-87.

together, from next to next, by means of the intermediary series. As James puts it: “Experience itself, taken at large, can grow by its edges. That one moment of it proliferates into the next by transitions which, whether conjunctive or disjunctive, continue the experiential tissue, cannot, I contend, be denied.”<sup>18</sup>

But it is not only knowledge and consciousness which are constructed like patchworks, from next to next, it is the world itself which weaves a gigantic patchwork. In this sense, James speaks of a mosaic philosophy. There is an incalculable number of networks, superimposed upon each other, forming a composite fabric. As James writes “We ourselves are constantly adding to the connexions of things, organizing labour unions, establishing postal, consular, mercantile, railroad, telegraph, colonial, and other systems that bind us and things together in ever wider reticulations ... From the point of view of these partial systems, the world hangs together from next to next in a variety of ways”.<sup>19</sup> In place of the idea of a concentric Whole that fuses its parts together, James substitutes an open world composed of fragments or systems -- so many multiply linked and self-consistent “small worlds”.<sup>20</sup>

The theme of the patchwork or of a mosaic philosophy will find its extension in the ‘20s in the work of Chicago School of Sociology. The city is described there as a fragmented reality through the diversity of neighbourhoods, the small isolated worlds which shelter immigrant populations, and the anonymous gatherings of displaced individuals. As Park writes, “processes of segregation establish moral distances which make of the city a mosaic of small worlds, touching each other without interpenetrating. This gives individuals the possibility of quickly and easily passing from one moral environment to another and encourages this fascinating, though dangerous, experience which consists in living in several different worlds, contiguous surely, but distinct nonetheless”.<sup>21</sup>

But following the other dimension, following the bundle of lines, the world forms not so much a patchwork, as a gigantic network. Line and fragment, network and patchwork, are the two great axes of the construction of experience and of the growth of the world. The world appears as a bundle of relations: for example, light as a line of influence,

---

<sup>18</sup>*Essays in Radical Empiricism*, p.42.

<sup>19</sup>*Some Problems of Philosophy* (Harvard University Press), V, p.69.

<sup>20</sup>*Pragmatism*, IV, p.67.” The result is innumerable little hangings-together of the world’s parts within the larger hangings-together, little worlds not only of discourse but of operation, within the wider universe”.

<sup>21</sup>Quoted in Hannerz, *Explorer la Ville* (Editions de Minuit), p.43-45.



space as a relation of linkage, time as a continuous relation of enveloping, and the line of consciousness whose path progresses through these other lines. Here is how one must always start: with a multiplicity of relations which are interlaced and superimposed upon each other in all directions, revealing themselves as one follows them. We must here quote James again:

There are innumerable kinds of connexion that special things have with other special things; and the *ensemble* of any one of these connexions forms one sort of *system* by which things are conjoined. Thus men are conjoined in a vast network of *acquaintanceship*. Brown knows Jones, Jones knows Robinson, etc.; and *by choosing your further intermediaries rightly* you may carry a message from Jones to the Empress of China, or the Chief of the African Pigmies, or to anyone else in the inhabited world. But you are stopped short, as by a non-conductor, when you choose one man wrong in this experiment.<sup>22</sup>

James' thought is like a Dos Passos novel, which describes the overlapping of connections, of rail, of maritime and aerial networks, mixing them with human biographies and fragments of current affairs, the great synchronic novel of simultaneous and overlapping itineraries. One must think of the world both as a vast fabric composed from next to next, and as a system of networks: *patchwork* and *network*.

If the philosophy that came out of pragmatism is perhaps the American philosophy *par excellence*, one will doubtless judge that this is the case because it thinks of relations as great systems of indefinitely constructible networks that overlap in all directions, thus anticipating the great developments in 20th century communication networks, spreading from mosaic-city to mosaic-city. It seems we are not far from concurring with the traditional definition of pragmatism as promoting American capitalism and its commercial values. Nevertheless, according to James, the philosopher does not cease to ambulate among these vast networks; he therefore seems to us much closer to a migrant worker (or to the artisan-surveyor of *A Thousand Plateaus*) than to a businessman. James' philosophy seems much closer to a less triumphant social order, that of the Hoboes (whose ways of life are described by the Chicago School of Sociology). They constitute the immense, dispersed flux of migrant

---

<sup>22</sup>*Pragmatism*, IV, p.67.

workers who traverse the United States, from Chicago to the West Coast, depending on the availability of seasonal work, organising themselves into temporary local societies: “Hobohemia”. “The veteran of the road always finds other veterans there, the incurable rogue finds his *alter ego*, the radical finds optimism, the con-man finds the alcoholic, they all find someone with whom they have an understanding (...). They meet them, and cross their path.”<sup>23</sup> They are radically different from the Pioneers, insofar as they are inseparable from the movements of the American capitalist economy, alternating between periods of expansion and acute crises, where the widespread practice of firing is combined with the great mobility of manual labour. This fast-paced rhythm contributes both to the instability of employment and to forced mobility, to “worker nomadism”. We are dealing with a veritable “dromomania”, to use Nels Anderson’s wonderfully apt expression. “This need takes hold of us without warning. We have the car, the train carriage, the steam boat, the aeroplane -- whose essential function is ultimately to gratify our vagabond tendencies.”<sup>24</sup> These are no longer sedentary workers; moreover, they do not easily accept the unions’ control at a distance. They are in the interval, so to speak, between two Frontiers, between the frontier of the first pioneer communities (who reached the Pacific around 1850) and the frontier of industrialisation (which completed its expansion around 1920). It is they who cross the country in an ambulatory manner and who travel the network of connections in all possible directions. They travel a fragment of the road and go from transitions to temporary stays, like characters in the novels of Jack London. It is thus in a curious manner that James’ philosophy can be said to be the philosophy of American capitalism.

Translated by Alberto Toscano

---

<sup>23</sup>See Nels Anderson’s *Le Hobo, Sociologie du Sans-Abri*, Nathan, 1993, and the preface by O. Scwhartz.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p.106.