

Constructing on contingency: William James from biology to ethics and politics

Construção em contingência: William James da biologia à ética e à política

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Abstract: There is still a widespread tendency to consider pragmatism as a dubious translation of Darwinian biology on a philosophical level, confusing it with the so called “social Darwinism”—the sociological movement inaugurated at the beginning of last century by W.G. Sumner, which actually was rather inspired by Spencer’s evolutionism. A reassessment of the reasons for these misunderstandings appears nowadays important when one considers how, in fact, many of the current socio-economic-political practices replicate precisely the criteria for an improper interpretation of the principle of natural selection involved in Darwinian biology. My paper will focus on some of the motives by which James provided a reading of Darwin’s theory that helps to deepen and integrate some of its most interesting features at a philosophical level, finally discarding any hasty reduction of human phenomena to an uncritical biologism. I will try to show how the ethical dimension and its political effects are the backbone of James’ approach to Darwinism, presenting the pluralistic, relativist and meliorist quality of the philosophical naturalism that he developed just on the basis of his dialectical relationship with Darwin’s biology. James appears today almost exclusively as “author of inspiration” in political or in training courses for managers or financiers. However there are a number of theoretical reasons suggesting the importance of his work for the current political-philosophical debate, including his insistence on the need to pay systematic attention to the consequences of epistemic principles with respect to the choices of values, as well as his plea for consolidating the pluralist, anti-dogmatic perspective suggested by Darwinian biology.

Keywords: James. Darwin. Pragmatist naturalism. Indeterminism. Political ethics.

Resumo: *Há ainda uma tendência generalizada para considerar o pragmatismo como uma tradução dúbia da biologia darwiniana em nível filosófico, confundindo-o com o chamado “darwinismo social”—o movimento sociológico inaugurado no início do século passado por W.G. Sumner que, na realidade, foi inspirado de certa forma pelo evolucionismo spenceriano. Uma reavaliação das razões para essas incompreensões parece, hoje, importante quando se considera como, de fato, muitas das atuais práticas socioeconômicas e políticas replicam precisamente os critérios para uma interpretação inadequada do princípio de seleção*

natural envolvido na biologia darwiniana. Meu artigo focará alguns dos motivos pelos quais James proporcionou uma leitura da teoria de Darwin que ajuda a aprofundar e integrar algumas de suas características mais interessantes em nível filosófico, descartando finalmente qualquer redução precipitada dos fenômenos humanos a um biologismo acrítico. Tentarei demonstrar como a dimensão ética e seus efeitos políticos são os pilares da abordagem de James ao darwinismo, apresentando a qualidade pluralística, relativista e meliorista do naturalismo filosófico que ele desenvolveu com base unicamente em sua relação dialética com a biologia de Darwin. James surge hoje quase que exclusivamente como “autor de inspiração” em cursos de políticos ou de treinamento para administradores ou financistas. Todavia, há várias razões teóricas que sugerem a importância de sua obra para o atual debate político-filosófico, inclusive sua insistência na necessidade de se prestar atenção sistemática às consequências dos princípios epistêmicos em relação às escolhas de valores, como também seu apelo para a consolidação da perspectiva pluralista, antidogmática sugerida pela biologia darwiniana.

Palavras-chave: James. Darwin. Naturalismo pragmatista. Indeterminismo. Ética política.

In order to appreciate the ethical-political implications of James's work, I take it to be useful to remark the effectiveness of the “disciplinary” net sustaining his overall theoretical activity, namely the intertwined conceptual elements of biology, psychology and philosophy giving his work its distinctive shape. Indeed we find in James a life-long commitment in establishing and maintaining a functional bond between such disciplinary fields.¹ This bond is not linear at all, and rather represents a strive to envision a theoretical-methodological net whose implementation excludes, at least in principle, the reduction of such ensemble of elements to any of the ‘knots’ constituting it. In other words, we need not to lose sight of the continuist and yet anti-reductionist commitment animating James's thought as well as the entire pragmatist movement, which the former decidedly spurred.

For what regards the ethical-political consequences of evolutionist biology, I would like to underscore the importance of James's commitment to show and keep well in view the continuity between biology, psychology, and philosophy, a disciplinary net which represents in the first place a promising theoretical-methodological project for a deep transformation and renewal of western culture.² James's contribution to the constitution of scientific psychology, which was facilitated by his reaction to Darwinian biology, should not be underestimated, as

1 In the preface to the volume *Manuscript Lectures (XIX)* of *The Works of William James*, Frederick H. Burkhardt claims: “James, appointed by President Charles W. Eliot as one of a new, younger cadre of teachers who were incorporating in their courses the most recent advances in science and scholarship, was one of the first teachers in America to develop the implications of evolutionary biology in his courses in physiology, psychology, and philosophy.” (*ML*, 5).

2 For this subject cf. the detailed reconstruction of the historical, cultural and academic context of James's work in BORDOGNA, 2008, particularly p. 59-155.

unfortunately still done by those interpreters of classical pragmatism insisting on the valorization of Peirce's logic alone at the expenses of James's psychologism or, even worse, limiting the importance of his contribution to the alleged intention to oppose religious faith to the spirit of the experimental sciences. Similarly, we should not underestimate James's seminal contribution to the process of revision of traditional foundationalism that characterized the Twentieth century—a contribution carrying the instances of indeterminism, which for James represented the distinctive mark of Darwinian biology. The latter is, in fact, the scientific cornerstone of the two main features of his philosophical outlook, namely contingentism and individualism. At the same time, just in order to grasp the significance of both James's contingentism and individualism, it is particularly important to acknowledge the anti-reductivist stance which is evident since his very first comments to Darwin's as well as to Spencer's evolutionism.

The paradigmatic indicator of such stance can be seized in a few well-known lines from *Great Men and the Environment*, the text which best conveys James's active reception and use of Darwinian biology, express the gist of his political thinking and views: "Societies of men are just like individuals, in that both at any given moment offer ambiguous potentialities of development"; "the community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community."³ These thoughts plainly merge with his contingentism as a philosophical view implying an unceasing battle against the craving for "absolutes", the various principles of Darwin's own biology included. In fact, we find in James a steady criticism of the interpretation of the Darwinian principle of natural selection or survival of the fittest in an absolutist key,⁴ coupled with the vindication of Darwin's merit of having individuated in *indeterminacy*, *chance*, and *ambiguity* the most authentic cipher of reality. More precisely, what is at stake is the refutation to translate an eminently descriptive principle—that is, the outcome of scientific research—into an absolute ontological criterion that, in its turn, is transformed into some sort of normative principle, as it has happened with the pseudo-science of social Darwinism. The latter is without doubt the polemical target of *Great Men* as well as of *The Importance of Individuals*, in which James replied to the criticism of Spencer's champions Allen and Fiske, hence confirming the ethical motif informing his interest in evolutionism since his *Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence*.⁵

In that early article the criticism of Spencer consisted in the application of Darwinian indeterminism to the study of the mental, which James would eventually characterize by famously replacing the metaphor of the knowing subject as "spectator" with that of the "actor". In 1903, the year of Spencer's death, James stigmatized his *Principles of Psychology* as an "orgy of ambiguity" (*EP*, 118). In any

3 JAMES, 1979, p. 163-189; 190-195. From now on *WB* followed by page number.

4 In a letter to James dated 10 March 1881, the British naturalist Grant Allen clarifies his point of view on the matter with regards to James's: "You lay much stress on the exceptional individual—I, on the mass from which he springs. Did you see the article on Carlyle in the *Athenæum* (*not* by me)? I thought it summed up my point of view admirably—"The bubble does not make the wave, but the wave the bubble."< (*CWJ*, 5: 156).

5 JAMES, 1978, p. 7-22. From now on *EP* followed by page number.

event, the *Remarks* on Spencer's conception of the mind started James's battle against teleological metaphysics of evolutionism, which he led in the attempt to reconstitute the tragic sense of indeterminism at work in all his philosophical interventions.

As it is clear from the quotations above, indeterminism invests in equal ways individuals and society: according to this picture, the two—individuals and societies—cannot then be considered as two opposed poles of the human world, that is as reciprocally *ab-soluti*—self-sufficient and autonomous one from each other—, as Spencerism implicitly holds by privileging the weight of the social environment over individuals, reinforcing in this way a cultural mindset which is still very much with us. In a nutshell, we should rather be considering them as concomitant and mutually operative factors in our social evolution as well as in our biological one. This means that both the particular kind of radical individualism promoted by social Darwinism and Spencer's emphasis on the environment articulated along socio-political lines necessary clash with the continuist sensibility animating James's humanism. I believe that holding this steady preoccupation of James in view will eventually prompt us to abandon or at least deeply revise the label of individualist philosopher *tout court* generally attached to him. James's individualism received different political interpretations both on the Marxist and Liberist that would deserve a detailed discussion, but I would simply point out the contemporary relevance of the “politics of the self” that he tends to edify by means of a theoretical devices as the concepts of imagination, self-criticism, reciprocal recognition and empowerment.⁶ Accordingly, and without condescending in the battles of words or labels that are always in danger of obscuring rather than clarifying the philosophical positions, I propose to label that of James as “radical humanism”, rather than simply as “individualism”. That wording is firstly suitable for signifying the difference between his outlook and the individualism stemming from the humanism of Renaissance, since he evidently shares the latter's project of detaching humans' image from non-human powers but, at the same time, tends to radicalize it just because of his ‘darwinian’ approach to the very notion of human being. Indeed, this is conceived in line with Darwin's biology or as living entity always involved in phylogenetic as well as ontogenetic evolutionary processes and no more according to the essentialist conception that is as an entity whose ‘human’ substance is pre-fixed once and for all. Thus one could say that James radicalizes the Renaissance humanism just because of his acceptance of Darwinian indeterminism as a conceptual frame of the very notion of humans. Most importantly, the wording ‘radical humanism’ may help to highlight the value James has always granted to individuals as fully “natural”⁷—earthly and worldly—

6 This thesis is baked in MARCHETTI, 2015, p. 214-247, to which I refer also for his accurate account for the various interpretations of political issues in James.

7 It is interesting to notice a footnote to the critical edition of the *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, in which James characterize the use of the term “humanism” [98.25 humanism]: “The author employs the term ‘humanism’ either as a synonym for ‘radical empiricism’” (cf., e.g., *The Experience of Activity*: 79–80); or as that general philosophy of life of which ‘radical empiricism’ is the theoretical ground (cf. *The Essence of Humanism*: 99). Furthermore, Hilary Putnam, in the introduction to the tenth volume of the *The Correspondence of William James*, underlines the deep connection between “Pragmatism-Humanism-Radical Empiricism” constituting James's “new and original Weltanschauung” (CWJ, 10:

beings, to their emotive and volitional life as well as to their aesthetical and moral interests, which would make them a real ‘anomaly’ of the excess of nature: an ‘anomaly’ not in the sense of the absence of natural constitutive factors, but rather as the proper expression of their abounding variety. In defining all these aspects of the human condition and their interference with our epistemological functions, “James always has in mind a ‘we’”, as Hilary Putnam rightly remarked; various forms of the first-personal plural pronoun feature in facts James’s writings, even though the emphasis on the ‘we’ is always counterbalanced by the emphasis on the ‘I’.⁸

Because of James’s stringent criticism of the quest for an absolute *primum*, ontological as well as methodological, on which would found our knowledge once for all, we should get rid of the idea that his work is ‘founded on’ Darwinism. On the contrary, I believe that—to borrow Sergio Franzese’s fitting words—“we would greatly distort James’s philosophy if reduced to the Darwinian influence”, though it is clear how much did James owed to Darwin (an influence which is widely acknowledged by James himself) that distinctive “earthly sense” characterizing his psychological and philosophical research⁹ as well as the ethical views intertwined with them, and from which we can draw still interesting suggestions for the political life.

In trying to advance a first, tentative characterization of the consequences of the above-mentioned intertwinement of biology, psychology, and philosophy featuring James’s work, we could say that *anti-absolutism* represents the hinge on which he invites us to rethink our ways of thinking and being, both at the individual and at the social level, as well as our ethical and political claims. It is superfluous to remark how relevant such aspect is in a time characterized by the requirements of multiculturalism such as ours, in which, paradoxically enough, dogmatic pushes of various sorts—ethical, religious, and pseudo-scientific—are often particularly threatening.

James’s continuism represents the dual significance—ontological as well as methodological—that Peirce granted to the idea of *continuum*, which he thought as the “architrave” of his entire philosophy. We can surely highlight some differences

xxvi). To this regard, there is a letter by James dated 22 February 1905 to the psychologist Giulio Cesari – Ferrari that testifies James’s exquisitely philosophical interest for those themes. James wrote: “I have got to working altogether outside of psychological lines, as some articles which I have recently sent you will show. I am interested in a metaphysical system (‘Radical Empiricism’) which has been forming itself with in me, more interested, in fact, than I have ever been in any thing else; but it is very difficult to get it into shape for any connected exposition” (*CWJ*, 10: 554).

8 PUTNAM, H. Philosophy as Reconstructive Activity: William James on Moral Philosophy, in W. Egginton – M. Sandbothe (eds.). *The Pragmatic Turn in Philosophy*. State University of New York Press: Albany, 2004, p. 34. A detailed account of Putnam’s reading of James’s philosophy can be found in CALCATERRA, R. M. Il James di Putnam, in R.M. Calcaterra (ed.). *Pragmatismo e filosofia analitica. Differenze e interazioni*. Quodlibet: Macerata, 2006, p. 207-225 and Eadem, El James de Putnam, *Areté*, vol. XXII, n. 2, 2010, p.189-208.

9 FRANZESE, 2009, p. 17.

between Peirce's "synechism" and James's,¹⁰ though James, as also confirmed by their epistolary exchanges, would have surely subscribed Peirce's assertion according to which synechism stands in the first place for a method of inquiry, a philosophical-scientific attitude to be implemented and diffused. More precisely, Peirce claimed reference to the ancient acceptance of the very word *sinechisis*, according to which it would stand for "connections, correlation of parts" obtained through surgical interventions, aiming to stress in this way that continuity is the result of a conceptual organization aimed to exhibit the *relations* and exchanges also where at a first look they seem to be lacking.¹¹ The synechist, claimed Peirce, does not negate the concept of duality, but rather opposes those philosophies "considering the parts of being as final elements" completely unrelated to each other, where the very same notion of "final element" clashes with the spirit of scientific inquiry, which in fact resists the idea that phenomena have a foundation which is inaccessible to knowledge. Peirce writes:

In particular, the synechist will not admit that physical and psychological phenomena are entirely distinct—whether as belonging to different categories of substance, or as entirely separate sides of the shield—but will insist that all phenomena are of one character, though some are more mental and spontaneous, others more material and regular. Still, all alike present that mixture of freedom and constraint, which allows them to be, nay, makes them to be teleological, or purposive.¹²

It is not hard to read through these lines a fundamental agreement with the ontological thesis advanced in the *Essays in Radical Empiricism* and then espoused by Bertrand Russell with his neutral monism: namely, the idea according to which all that is real and the entire texture of our experience is at the same time multi-folded and yet continuous at the same time, as reality is constituted by one kind of *stuff* only. Obviously, this did not mean to claim the existence of a "general" stuff of which all things—both mental and physical—would be made, as that would have meant the subscription of metaphysical monism—being it spiritualist or materialist in mind: such metaphysical monism would in fact be incapable to capture the multiple variety of relationships constituting the objective world as well as the activity of human intelligence, the particularities and differences in meaning informing its exercise and acquisitions. In other words, we would miss the discontinuities characterizing the real and intervening in the yet deep unity of the vital flux in which the *stream of thought* consists in—its "*fringes*" besides the differences between its "*transitive*" and "*substantive*" parts, as James claimed in the *Principles of Psychology*. In particular, James's radical empiricism couples the refutation of the atomistic conception of sensorial experience, advanced in the *Principles*, with the refutation of Cartesian psycho-physical dualism as well as with the polemics against the tendency of traditional rationalism to "correct its own incoherencies by the addition of trans-

10 For a more adequate characterization, please see CALCATERRA, 2011, p. 412-424.

11 CP 7.565.

12 CP 7.570.

experiential agents of unification, substances, intellectual categories and powers, or Selves.¹³ The “trans-experiential agents of unification” clash with the methodological aspect of the continuism that James aims at establishing between Darwinian biology, psychology and philosophy, that is the faith in the experimental method which he intertwines with fallibilism—the latter consisting in the epistemic principle he shares with Peirce, which is also most representative of their philosophical collaboration. At this level we can locate the relevance of Jamesian radical empiricism for the contemporary debate between naturalists and anti-naturalists. For what regards more in particular ethics and politics, the intertwinement between experimental method and fallibilism amount to the establishment and promotion of a philosophical orientation aimed at safeguarding the specificity of the human without renouncing to consider it as a moment indistinguishable from the *vital* processes of nature. This adjustment of optical focus makes it possible to appreciate how numerous themes and problems still at the center of the psychological research—volition, emotions, moral and religious sentiments—are tackled in *The Principles of Psychology* with a critical awareness that makes his work the best expression of the battle against the *dogmatism* of absolutes—a battle which evidently questions the authoritarian pretenses of philosophy as well as of the sciences.

It needs here to be stressed James’s invitation to recognize the complexity constitutive of our assertions about reality, that is the short-circuit between conceptual, empirical and biological elements constituting the activity of the human mind. “The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything”, as James writes in *Pragmatism*, echoing the description of the teleological nature of the mind advanced in the *Principles*, particularly in the chapter titled *The Perception of Reality*. In such context, he challenges the idea of an objective world completely independent of us and with which concepts should “accord” unequivocally, that is independently from the degree in which they are able to call in cause our needs and interests, or independently from their coherence with the set of interactive experiences characterizing the relationship of the human subjects with their environment. Furthermore, welcoming Lotze’s views on the matter, James tended to remark how nature does not establish any hierarchy of beings, rather offering a *plurality* of forms of life, particular and specific, so that the place of human beings in respect to the other elements of the natural world is to be found in the analysis of its peculiar structures.¹⁴ The psychical life would thus constitute the distinctive aspect of human beings in respect to other animals, and it is thus at this level that the critical role of philosophy becomes an indispensable instrument for psychological research.

Obviously, the possibility and the ways of seizing the “facts” of the external reality are questions which psychology can address with its own instruments, and yet it remains to be seen up to which point is it possible to claim that our mental structures—our logical-semantic categories and our criteria of value—are the result of merely causal intercourses between the experience accumulated by the human race and its cerebral variations. In particular, for James experimental psychology can throw light on the organic basis of a number of mental phenomena such as elementary

13 JAMES, 1976, p. 23.

14 For the importance of Lotze on James, see FRANZESE, 2000, p. 30ss; HOOKWAY, 2009, p. 44-52.

sensations, some selected emotions, and also the ideas of space, time and causality; and yet the issue of the relationship between mind and its objects of knowledge or value remains a question whose resolution necessarily entails the employment of that very conceptual instrument which scientific psychology should account for. I am here touching a crucial aspect of the divergences between “psychologism” and “anti-psychologism”, between the “normative” and the “descriptive”, which is the problem at the core of the relationship between philosophy and experimental psychology.¹⁵

This debate has evident, important repercussions on ethical and political theories: a problem that we should, in being faithful to James’s spirit, acknowledge as still unresolved, and that the latest developments of neurosciences seem to be able to resolve only *in principle*.¹⁶ However, James’s invitation to monitor the alleged *autonomous certainties* of scientific psychology is only apparently in contrast with his steady trust in the methodology of the natural sciences, such as biology. It would suffice to recall that the *Principles of Psychology* open with the commitment to follow the experimental method, or even—to use his words—to adopt a “rigorously positivistic” stance, of which he applauded the empiricist attitude. At the same time, it is important to stress James’s awareness that many questions about the nature of the mental involve a necessary entwinement of the psycho-physical research with the metaphysical one, given his belief in the unbroken interference of the mentalist vocabulary with the propositions progressively formulated by experimental psychology.¹⁷ It is perhaps healthy to recall the closing lines of *Psychology: Briefer Course*:

When we talk of “psychology as a natural science”, we must not assume that that means a sort of psychology that stands at last on solid ground. It means just the reverse; it means a psychology particularly fragile, and into which the waters of metaphysical criticism leak at every joint, a psychology all of whose elementary assumptions and data must be reconsidered in wider connections and translated into other terms. It is, in short, a phrase of diffidence, and not of arrogance; and it is indeed strange to hear people talk triumphantly of “the New Psychology”, and write “Histories of Psychology”, when into the real elements and forces which the word covers not the first glimpse of clear insight exists.¹⁸

15 On the position of James within the debate of his time between Psychologists and anti-Psychologists see the timely analysis of F. Bordogna in *op. cit.* p. 155-188. In recent years there has been a tendency to verify the relationship between psychology and pragmatism through the reconstruction of the relationship between Peirce, James, Dewey and logical positivism as a movement committed to the search for a ‘scientific philosophy’: cf. RICHARDSON, 2008, p. 295-315; FERRARI, 2010, p. 97-115; Idem, 2015, p. 234-265; UEBEL, 2015, p.1-18. Within this historiographical line emerged, inter alia, interesting ‘anti-Psychologists’ features of Jamesian thought, including his attention to the a priori elements that intervene in scientific research to which he seems to attribute a role similar to the function of ‘protocols’ Carnap’s and Lewis’s conventionalism.

16 See e.g., NAGEL, 1974, p. 435-450; BLOCK, 2009, p. 1111-1122.

17 On the matter: see FLANAGAN, 1997, p. 25-48; and COOPER, 2002.

18 JAMES, 1984, p. 400.

The assessment of these advises requires to keep in mind the *realist* orientation of Jamesian epistemology. Such orientation is openly defended in *The Meaning of Truth*, and employed especially in the new form of correspondentism theorized in *Pragmatism*, on the wake of the criticism of the criterion of objective certainty first articulated in *The Sentiment of Rationality*. I shall here only remark that James is not expressing a generic skepticism towards philosophical and scientific research, but is rather interested in contrasting the dogmatic tendencies inscribed in our “natural” search for stable enough theoretical and practical reference points. James suggests that, in order to avoid the temptation to recur to the principle of “objective certainty”, it would suffice to realize how this has been the privileged instrument of the Inquisition, but this doesn’t mean to disown the value of the quest for truth.¹⁹

That James’s radical empiricism represents a confirmation of the ontological and methodological character of his continuism is confirmed by the most challenging pages of *A Pluralistic Universe*,²⁰ where he stresses once again the contingent nature of reality, the impossibility to reduce it to whatever absolute principle because the finitude/contingence of the world is tantamount to the realm of possibility, or better—to borrow the words which opened this intervention—it equates to the original *ambiguity* of all that comes into being: in the physical as well as in the human world, with its individuals and its societies. The indeterminist mark of Darwinian biology gets realized in the overcoming of the rationalistic notions of the “unity of the world” and the “unity of the self”, so to eventually replace the notion of “universe” with that of “pluriverse”. And Putnam is once again right in suggesting that the famous saying “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy” best represent this perspective.

It is uncontroversial that the notion of “pluriverse” finds its epistemological, methodological, and ethical reference in that of “pluralism”. Yet we might ask how the latter is in accordance with the meliorism promoted by James across the philosophical spectrum, included those related to our individual and social life. There is in fact the risk that James’s meliorism runs the risk of issuing in some form of mere *wishful thinking* to which most forms of meliorism are prone. However this risk seems to be greatly mitigated by some criteria internal to his philosophy that, at the same time, reflect and go beyond his approval of Darwinian biology. First of all, it is essential to consider that, generally speaking, meliorism is not equivalent to optimism and this is particularly evident in James just because of his interpretation of Darwinism in terms of indeterminate interactions between individuals and environment, as I previously exposed. To be sure this interpretation is at the core of James’s critique of Spencer’s optimistic view of evolutionism, which he contrasted emphasizing the indeterminacy of natural and human life. In particular, James maintained the impossibility of a theoretical explanation of evil and, using heavily ironical language about the optimistic outlook represented by Spencer’s *Data of Ethics*, he emphasizes the dramatic alternating of good and evil in individual

19 James writes: “But please observe, now, that when as empiricists we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself. We still pin our faith on its existence, and still believe that we gain an ever better position towards it by systematically continuing to roll up experiences and think” (*WB*, 23-24).

20 JAMES, 1977.

and social human life, arguing for personal responsibility in giving an increasingly positive course to men's history (*WB*, 129-131). Therefore James defines meliorism according to the category of 'possibility' which he applies to both the ontological and ethical realm, describing it as a sort of mobile boundary at the intertwining of human ideas or values and environmental or 'objective' determinants:

Meliorism treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become.²¹

This assertion set up his commitment to recover the cultural instruments and tools that would help both single individuals and social groups to acknowledge the spheres of the human more often emarginated, hence engaging in re-defining ourselves beyond the many fixed and fixing theoretical schemes so to be able to establish one's individual and social goals. Here it lies the distance between Jamesian pragmatism and the universalist paradigm, which the former sees as continuous with the necessitarianism of the determinists. As an alternative, James's contingentism requires us to recover those concrete experiences of meaning and value that human beings inevitably strive to attain, precisely because the need to give sense and value to oneself and one's doings is, for James, an integral part of that kind of biological 'anomaly' that we are. Not unlikely James would have subscribed the analyses of the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, according to which this need is so radical that its elusion issues in death or alternatively in destructive fury, being it a primary biological necessity.²²

The intertwinement between the biological realm and the realm of value is pivotal for the political articulation and consequences of James's meliorism, which however calls in cause the human responsibility to take those choices that would eventually give a thoughtful direction to the ambiguity characterizing the human world. But this feature exceeds the field of biology, and on such a point James seems clear enough, as for example we can see from his famous reply to Erasmus Darwin, Charles's older son.²³ In a nutshell, the relation between ethics and Darwinian biology is apparently both constructive and negative: the latter helped us to disclose the "pluralistic universe", hence to avoid the mistakes infesting the various forms of monism, but it cannot point us the way to inhabit the indefinite possibilities of the "pluriverse". In addition, James's contingentism affirms the empirical nature of ethical-moral criteria, presenting it as an antidote to mere casuistry, being it philosophical or theological. But this point of view tends at the same time to re-collocate the concepts of moral responsibility and obligation within the classical scheme according to which their existence is a function of the possibility of free will. Actually, this scheme seems to be radicalized by James's emphasis on the point

21 JAMES, 1975, p. 137. From now on *P* followed by page number.

22 FRANKL, 1948, in which is claimed how the experience of the prisoners in Nazi lagers shows how the search for meaning is a "primary motivation" of human life rather than a sheer "secondary rationalization" of instinctual pulses.

23 The letter dates back to 1882.

of view of the agent and, more generally, on action as the criterion of the formation and confirmation of beliefs. What matters to their validity are their processes of validation (*valid-action*):

In the realm of truth-processes facts come independently and determine our beliefs provisionally. But these beliefs make us act, and as fast as they do so, they bring into sight or into existence new facts which re-determine the beliefs accordingly. So the whole coil and ball of truth, as it rolls up, is the product of a double influence. Truths emerge from facts; but they dip forward into facts again and add to them; which facts again create or reveal new truth (the word is indifferent) and so on indefinitely. The 'facts' themselves meanwhile are not *true*. They simply *are*. Truth is the function of the beliefs that start and terminate among them. (*P*, 108).

At the beginning of *The Dilemma of Determinism*, James states his intention to apply to the moral domain the idea according to which human beings interact "pragmatically" with the natural world (*WB*, 115), and here, similarly to the *Principles*, we read that the philosophical problem of liberty originates in the descriptions of the world in which individuals are able to take rational choices according to standards of life which they are willing to follow. If so, then the thorniest problem is that of assessing the ways of picking up one's standards. In this context it would be useful to recall James's commitment, *qua pragmatist*, to promote a *cultural mindset* able to combine our social needs with the existential outlooks of the individuals involved.

The tireless defense of liberty animating James's meliorism will find a confirmation if backed up with an analysis of the functional relationships between social and individual spheres in the context of the construction of behavioral choices. For example, the orientation of the neo-Wittgensteinian theory of action elaborated by Henrik von Wright looks like a promising ally. In particular, I am here thinking to von Wright's emphasis on the unbroken exchange of social and individual considerations regarding the sphere of action: between the "internal and external determinants of action", that is "between the volitive-cognitive factors working, so to say, 'from within' the agent" and the symbolic challenges put to him "from without". On this basis, and echoing James, von Wright argues for not only the complexity of human motivations, but also for the very ambiguity of the term "reason" when applied to actions. This latter aspect clearly fits with the dynamic and pluralist conception of human rationality promoted by James, and there are good reasons for believing that he would have appreciated the following paradigmatic expression of von Wright's theory of action:

The 'freedom' or 'free will' of a man consists in the fact he acts, one could say. [...] To deny that an agent is free is to commit a contradiction in terms. The 'mystery' of freedom, if there is one, is the mystery of the fact that there are agents and actions.²⁴

24 WRIGHT, 1980, p. 79.

Of course, for James, there are no metaphysical guarantees for our capacity to act freely, and even in this case, as with religious faith, James's discourse seems to be leveled on the dialectic of Pascal's wager. However, the idea of such a capacity represents without doubt the logical presupposition of James's humanism, that is the transposition on the epistemic and ethical dimension of the biological principle of indeterminism. All in all, my interpretative guess is that James's work as a whole represents nothing short of the great challenge of our time: namely, translating the *pathos* of contingency in an *ethos* capable to find an equilibrium between the renounce of absolutes and the responsibility to build value criteria that would reinforce the respect for human differences together with the protection of that "us" which, as said, informs his epistemological writings.

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