Article

An ecology of trust? Consenting to a pluralist universe

Didier Debaise
Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique (FNRS), Belgium; Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

Isabelle Stengers
Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

Abstract
The idea of 'progress' was undoubtedly at the heart of the experience of the Moderns, guiding at the same time their thought, the values that they gave themselves, the hopes that animated them and of innumerable justifications that they found for all the processes of dispossession, disqualification and dismemberment that they implemented. Starting with William James's diagnosis of the hold the idea of 'progress' has over us, and following his proposition that this idea is at work in the world itself, in the ecological and social ravages that it guides and justifies, this article aims to analyse the political and speculative effects of the notion of progress and to propose, through what we call an 'ecology of trust', other ways of collectively composing our modes of existence.

Introduction

What does it mean to think 'after progress'? Would we be at a historical moment of rupture, leaving behind us what would be nothing more than an outdated set of illusions and erroneous habits of thought? Would we be in the era of 'post-progress' as we used to speak of a 'post-modern' thought? We think that the 'turns', the 'posts' of the

Corresponding author:
Didier Debaise, Université Libre de Bruxelles, CP133/02, Avenue F. D. Roosevelt, 50, Brussels, 1050, Belgium.
Email: didier.debaise@ulb.be

academic-media temporality continue to participate in the hold that the notion of progress has still on us. One does not overcome a hold, one must heal from it.

A hold must first be diagnosed, and it is in the thought of William James that we have found resources that may be precious because, like any diagnosis worthy of the name, it does not look for a 'true' cause, but creates the ground where the hypothesis of a cure can be formulated.

James's diagnosis is at the heart of the first part of this article. We are particularly interested in the 'horror of becoming a dupe' that James locates at the heart of modern experience. This horror, he shows, communicates with a fear that has nothing to do with some healthy caution. It has a passionate dimension. Under its sway it is the whole world that becomes suspicious, tempting, likely to lead us to what is not a mistake, but rather a real sin. Those who know they are threatened by sin must become insensitive to temptation. What we have called progress requires this insensitivity. But this fear also raises an ontological question: what universe or world does it contribute to create? It is a pragmatics of the notion of 'progress' that unfolds in these questions and that we will try to implement throughout this first part: how do such notions, such postures, such feelings, affect us and the environments in which we live?

It is following James's diagnosis that we will be able, in the second part of this article, to follow the ways in which paths to a cure may be attempted. It is once again in James that we will find elements indicating that such paths might aim at a regeneration of what we will call an 'ecology of trust'. It is not a matter of establishing a general theory of trust, but of inheriting a heterogeneous plurality of fragile, non-triumphalist suggestions that range from science to activism.

The horror of becoming a dupe

William James characterized the rationality claimed by his contemporaries, those we are now used to calling 'the Moderns', as expressing first and foremost 'horror of becoming a dupe'. Their founding myth would be that of a past defined by false ideas, irrational attachments, subjective interpretations, unfounded beliefs. Their inexorable duty would be to free, by all means necessary, they themselves and all other peoples still prisoners of this past. They would have to suspect and submit to the test everything, including the very stuff of the universe, prone to delude and lead them astray at any moment. The Moderns would be those who would never stop breaking with what, judged to be deceptive or seductive, exposes them to what, for them, is synonymous with perdition.

The sanctification of methods of verification, of bifurcations of all kinds (belief and knowledge, subjective and objective, real and apparent, etc.) coincides with immense processes of disqualification of knowledge that have made one of us say that 'We live in a veritable cemetery for destroyed practices and collective knowledges' (Stengers, 2015, p. 98). What will enable us to resist a universe that can delude us at any moment? What method could protect us from those, charlatans, impostors, who are waiting for the slightest opportunity to deceive us? How can we educate a public that never ceases to fall under the spell of irrational forces against which it is powerless? For Moderns, the guideline seems to be an immoderate taste for any idea, theory, or method identifying truth as disenchantment and hurt, as destroying any reason to believe in ourselves or this world.

James noted in *The Will to Believe* the psycho-social dimensions of this stance: 'he who says "Better go without belief forever than believe a lie!" merely shows his own preponderant private horror of becoming a dupe' (James, 1979, p. 25). This would be the great ritornello of modern thought with its dramas and heroic figures: 'Believe nothing, keep your mind in suspense forever, rather than by closing it on insufficient evidence incur the awful risk of believing lies' (James, 1979, p. 24). We would have the duty to resist this awful, even sinful, risk at any price. We would be bound to forsake the hope and quest of truth itself.

Moderns would then be defined by what, James insists, is a choice. 'Believe truth! Shun error! – these, we see, are two materially different laws; and by choosing between them we may end by coloring differently our whole intellectual life. We may regard the chase for truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary; or we may, on the other hand, treat the avoidance of error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance' (James, 1979, p. 24). The intense, almost religious, importance that the Moderns give to the notion of 'progress' lies in keeping with the imperative of avoiding error, the imperative of mistrust.

By making time a homogeneous advance, to be imposed on all, and which would not cease to break with its previous forms, progress proceeds as a true machine for disqualifying the past, condemning all those who, in one way or another, still remain attached to it, or give in to the temptations of 'regression'. By defining nature as that which has inspired suspect feelings of admiration and respect, progress turns it into what is to be mastered, exploited and dominated without scruples. By considering knowledge an operation of rupture with common sense, interests, attachments and opinion, progress gives to those who obey the imperative of mistrust the heroic feeling of belonging to the few in possession of unattached knowledge, to the few who alone can fight against this universe of deception.

The thinning of the world

James's diagnosis not only makes the 'horror of becoming a dupe' the central element of the relationships – embodied in the notion of progress – that Moderns have with their own story (childhood that must be brought to maturity), their environments (nature from which one must sternly distance oneself) and with others (those who still believe, where we know), it also gives a dramatic reach to its performative power. For James, the question of dupery entails consequences that are both existential and ontological, which he expresses in a passage from *A Pluralistic Universe*: 'Philosophies are intimate parts of the universe, they express something of its own thought of itself. A philosophy may indeed be a most momentous reaction of the universe upon itself. It may, as I said, possess and handle itself differently in consequence of us philosophers, with our theories, being here; it may trust itself or mistrust itself the more, and, by doing the one or the other, deserve more the trust or the mistrust. What mistrusts itself deserves mistrust' (James, 1977, p. 143). So it is not only the mistrust Moderns entertain towards their world that makes them see the danger everywhere. This world could well become effectively fearsome as a result of the way they treat it.

This follows from one of the great maxims of the Jamesian pragmatism that is too little emphasized. It is only through an act of abstraction, secondary and always retrospective, that we can dissociate ideas and things, representations and experience,

theories and the universe. We must ask for each theory, each idea, what it does, i.e. how it transforms the universe to which it is added. And in particular for the notion of 'progress'. We can obviously establish its components (linear time, rupture with the natural environment, objectivity of knowledge, etc.), but the essential question might be how it contributes to the manner in which the universe may 'possess and handle itself'. Behind James's pathos ('the horror of becoming a dupe', running 'the awful risk of believing lies', etc.) there is therefore a real ontological question: what universe is being created through and with our mistrust?

For James, the epistemological and ontological answer to this question can be called 'thinning'. We might say that the density of modes of existence, the plurality of relations which we can entertain with the beings that make up our world and which they entertain between them, the heterogeneity of our knowledge, this 'overabundance of reality' were the target of a leitmotiv: the capricious, reckless, reality was to give way to the uniform course of a nature which would then reliably reward rational knowledge and serve human ends – the Baconian view of progress.

For James, if there is a test that we can put to our ideas, it would be this one: do they result in a thinning of our conditions of existence and thought or in a thickening? This test is more decisive, more constitutive, more essential than the tests of truth, adequacy and coherence, which are taken as primordial, but which in a certain way presuppose it. It was on the occasion of a tribute to the thought of G. Fechner that James proposed this distinction.

Drawing his portrait, he writes: 'He was in fact a philosopher in the "great" sense, although he cared so much less than most philosophers care for abstractions of the "thin" order. For him the abstract lived in the concrete' (James, 1977, p. 70). It is therefore at the level of abstractions that the distinction is made: there are abstractions whose effect is a thinning of what they target, as if they only find their reason and their effectiveness in the subtraction of the qualities of concrete things, of their ways of valuing their environment, of the manifold relationships they weave with others. There are, on the contrary, abstractions that thicken things, enhance unnoticed dimensions, highlight the fragile and event-driven nature of their existence.

Let us take, as an example of a thinning abstraction, the seemingly legitimate question: 'What does this depend on?' Feeling dependent, or feeling that something depends on you, are concrete, painful or transformative experiences. But this question, when asked by a scientist, is accompanied by the clause ceteris paribus ('all else being equal'): anything that could complicate the dependency relationship must be able to be put in brackets so that this relationship can be defined. Whatever is being questioned must be able to be abstracted from its world. The notion of dependence is therefore one of those abstract notions, which seem obvious and self-evident, but whose field of actual relevance is extremely selective. Typically, it is in the laboratory that one encounters phenomena defined in terms of variables that can vary independently of each other so that each can be related to the effect its variation produces, the others being kept constant. But this has not prevented the notion of dependence from becoming an all-purpose abstraction. Thus, in many models in the so-called social and human sciences, including when they are systemic, the clause ceteris paribus is accepted as what a science must be allowed to suppose in order for science to be possible at all. This in turn implies an attitude of methodological mistrust towards anything that could thicken the situation, for example

the 'terrible' possibility that the 'subjects' are not indifferent to the intent of the questions they have to answer in the name of science but actively define themselves in relation with the thick situation.

Anna Tsing introduced the correlative notion of scalability, which also makes a being's indifference to its world crucial. For engineers, the operation of a computing device is reliable if it can withstand a change in scale (an increase in the number of users or categories to be managed, for example). As she writes, 'Scalability is the ability of a project to change scales smoothly without any change in project frames. A scalable business, for example, does not change its organization as it expands' (Tsing, 2015, p. 38). Scalability here does not respond to a methodological imperative, but to a practical concern – to render scalable or to maintain scalability has nothing abstract about it. Ensuring that an operation will not be sensitive to circumstances is an actual, hard work, thinning down of the world. It 'banishes meaningful diversity, that is, diversity that might change things' (Tsing, 2015, p. 38). It is the same concern that prevails in industrial organization. And it is also, from the plantations whose cruel invention Anna Tsing recalls, to industrial agriculture, the project that has allowed the production of intrinsically dependent beings: plants selected for monoculture, which cannot live without inputs, fertilizers and pesticides, but which will have the same characteristics wherever they grow. In all cases, it allowed one thin value to become the only objective measure of what becomes a 'product'. 'By envisioning more and more of the world through the lens of the plantation, investors devised all kinds of new commodities. Eventually, they posited that everything on earth – and beyond – might be scalable, and thus exchangeable at market values' (Tsing, 2015, p. 40). Moderns did not just posit nature as uniform, they largely render it so.

But effectively abstracting beings, depriving them of their capacity to participate in the thickness of their world also means robbing them of their own dynamics – monocultures are fragile, vulnerable to epidemics; students who have been led to identify the knowledges that could have sustained and empowered them with instruments of success are ready to accept their authority without understanding them, in an unreliable or irresponsible way. Thinned down worlds are worlds we have good reasons to mistrust and fear.

The thesis that the operations of abstractions that thin down the world contribute to making an impoverished and vulnerable, and therefore also fearsome world, finds its direct echo in what Félix Guattari called a triple ecological disaster. Taking up Bateson's famous 'There is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds' as the epigraph of his *Three Ecologies*, he gave the ecological question a transversal power that seems to us indispensable for thinking 'after progress'. For what has been called progress has for its correlate invasive ecologies, imposing themselves and spreading thanks to the desertification of the ravaged landscapes in which they proliferate.

In *The Three Ecologies* Guattari describes a triple disaster that can be related with what James taught us to call the 'politics of mistrust', reducing environments to a simple resource, using scalable categories that make ways of living, of attaching, of valuing equivalent or insignificant. Presenting these disasters as ecological ravages allows him to characterize as inseparable the devastation of ecosystems by an extractivist logic, the 'erosion of subjectivities' (Guattari, 2000, p. 31) by their confinement in the categories of the individuals and their psychologizing functions, and the destruction of collective subjectivity by a generalized competition at all levels between individuals.

Guattari's analysis thus makes a decisive break with the questioning of progress on the basis of the 'nuisances' that it causes: only categories of another kind, transversal, aesthetico-existential ones (Guattari, 2000, p. 56), may characterize what is required to ward off the triple devastation that threatens life on Earth. Guattari called for a transversal catalytic bringing into being what he named 'existential territories'[1] capable of processually opening up individual and group subjectivities. 'The reconquest of a degree of creative autonomy in one particular domain encourages conquests in other domains – the catalyst for a gradual reforging and renewal of humanity's confidence in itself starting at the most miniscule level' (Guattari, 2000, p. 69).

Consenting to the thickness of the world

It is therefore appropriate to start with what might seem miniscule indeed, in view of the scale of the disaster. If there is one science that has contributed prodigiously to the thinning of life, it is biology dominated by the neo-Darwinian vulgate. According to the latter, a single principle suffices to explain the abundant diversity of life: the blind competition between specific individual lineages. Each living organism would be what it is because its lineage has survived the competition. However, following the now widely recognized pioneering work of Lynn Margulis (Margulis & Sagan, 1995), today's biologists affirm that if the Earth is fertile, full of diverse ways of living, it is due to the invention of interdependent relationships. From the smallest cell in our bodies to the tangle of ecosystems we call nature, no isolatable living thing as such can be credited with what makes it capable of living. As Tsing writes: 'Bacteria made our oxygen atmosphere, and plants help maintain it. Plants live on land because fungi made soil by digesting rocks. As these examples suggest, world-making projects can overlap, allowing room for more than one species. Humans, too, have always been involved in multi-species world making' (Tsing, 2015, p. 22). All of them are what William James called 'social organisms', originating from and participating in mutualist ecologies. An individual is what it is only with others, thanks to others but also at the risk of others.

Biologist Scott F. Gilbert writes: 'Nature may be selecting "relationships" rather than individuals or genomes. What we usually consider to be an "individual" may be a multi-species group that is under selection' (Gilbert et al., 2010, p. 673). Which means that the question of what a living being is capable of has become an open question, all the more so as interdependence can be generative, opening up the group and the beings who participate in it to new possibilities. Biology should thus explore how beings are liable to transform, or even metamorphose, thanks to the relationships they entertain with others. The policy of explanation by dependence (on selection, on genes, today on the genome, even on the proteome) has thus abstracted away what might be a crucial element in the history of terrestrial life.

Interdependence is of course an abstraction, but it is an abstraction that thickens the world. Correlatively, it implies the resurgence of a supposedly proto-scientific practice, that of natural histories, irreducibly empirical histories. Nothing is 'natural' any longer in nature, in the sense of being explainable by general laws in the light of which biologists could ignore the anecdotal and identify the deceptive. On the contrary, biologists must learn to allow themselves to be intrigued, to never assume that they know in advance what is liable to participate in a way of life or transform it. In other words, the biology of

interdependence requires that biologists consent to what could resemble a 'regression' towards empiricism, towards a characterization of cases that does not aspire to lead up to a definition of interdependence in general.

It is here where we encounter a central theme of William James's philosophy, the theme of 'consent'. The term must be understood in its most literal sense: *consentire* (feel with or together). It is not a passive agreement but a both wilful and transformative acceptance. Indeed for James to consent first means to *not* reject a perspective or an idea, or an object that is 'difficult' – for scientists, for instance, a perspective which would make them vulnerable to the accusation of regression – but, on the contrary, to deliberately sustain it: 'Sustained in this way by a resolute effort of attention, the difficult object erelong begins to call up its own congeners and associates and ends by changing the disposition of the man's consciousness altogether. . . . Consent to the idea's undivided presence, this is effort's sole achievement' (James, 1950, p. 564).

Biologists who today consent to the idea of interdependence consent to be transformed by what they are dealing with so that what they are dealing with becomes something other than a new field for thinning abstractions in the name of scientific progress. They situate themselves 'after progress'.

We can associate this type of consent with the concept of involution proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1992, pp. 238–239) thanks to the transversal concept of 'involutionary momentum' subsequently crafted by Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers. They found in Darwin's book on orchids fertilized by insects, often considered anecdotal – not advancing science – the testimony of the passion that possessed Darwin when he studied the 'involutive' relationship that develops between orchids and the wasps induced to try and copulate with them; Darwin also let himself be intrigued, then captivated, by the orchid. Hustak and Myers write: 'we read Darwin against the grain of his evolutionary logics. We are interested in the moments of perplexity, excess, and affective pull, moments when he got caught up in the energetic momentum that ingathers organisms in complex ecological relations' (Hustak & Myers, 2012, p. 82).

Involution, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is always situated 'between' two heterogeneous beings; contrary to Darwinian evolution which concerns lineage and filiation, it is a matter of alliance. The attraction that the orchid exerts on the wasp is not reducible to a hijacking of the hereditary link between sexual excitation and reproduction. The wasp is not duped, it enjoys. As for Darwin, who also enjoys, he has not 'regressed', he has consented to open himself up to affects officially excluded by the logic derived from the lineage of scientists aiming at objectivity. He has consented to let himself be affected by the orchid. And the change of practice of biologists who have consented to abandon the notion of dependence is 'involutionary' too, because, instead of competing for the right definition of interdependence, they are thickening this notion, multiplying its modalities, and, in so doing, restoring to the history of life a proliferating inventiveness that defies our abstract, scalable, categories.

Cultivating trust?

Interdependence is a risk; it can be fragile, because what or whom a being counts on can be lacking for many reasons, the main one today being modern modes of intervention,

i.e. progress. But this risk does not generally communicate with mistrust or the horror of becoming a dupe. If thinned down worlds are worlds which we have good reasons to fear and mistrust, thicker worlds require a culture of attention. Correlatively, the risk of trust, when it bears on interdependence, is not between two individuals, but must take on a meaning that is collectively experienced as such. This is why we ask here the question of a culture of trust.

Cultivating trust is part of an ecological regeneration whose affective, existential and ethical dimensions must be understood in terms that may be called pragmatic, because their truth lies in their verification, in the creation of links that have no other justification than what they make possible. They are not bonds of reciprocity, affirming a recognition of the other, but mutualist bonds, that is to say, binding heterogeneous beings who need each other but each for its own reasons. William James evokes a form of 'precursive faith' that allows independent parties to cooperate, to form a 'social organism'. Such an organism 'is what it is because each member proceeds to his own duty with a trust that the other members will simultaneously do theirs. . . . A government, an army, a commercial system, a ship, a college, an athletic team, all exist on this condition, without which not only is nothing achieved, but nothing is even attempted' (James, 1979, p. 29). James takes a deliberately negative example: the looting of a train. How can one not at first sight be surprised that a small number of looters can hold a train full of passengers under control? Why don't they defend themselves, why don't they reverse the relationship since the balance of power is, seen from the outside, favourable to them? What makes the difference is that the looters 'can count on one another, while each passenger fears that if he makes a movement of resistance, he will be shot before anyone else backs him up. If we believed that the whole car-full would rise at once with us, we should each severally rise, and train-robbing would never even be attempted' (James, 1979, p. 29). There are, he concludes, cases 'where faith in a fact can help create the fact'.[2]

Interdependence can be generative. It is in these terms that we will pose the question of a culture of trust. That such a culture offers no guarantee, that it is not 'good in itself', the example chosen by James, the train-looting, but also that of the other institutions he cites, where a closed group or even clique culture often prevails, are enough to bear witness to this. But it should also be remembered that the examples taken by James belong to modern, individualistic societies. These institutions are what has survived the eradication of collective practices which were customary everywhere on earth and which involved the cultivation of the kind of trust that 'making things together' or 'commoning' practices require – a precursive trust but also, Martin Savransky notes, a recursive one since 'the trust of our held-out hand is a trust in another hand's trust, a trust in another hand's trust in our trust in theirs' (Savransky, 2021, p. 101).

A new generation of activists is now sweeping away academic dissertations on the relationship between Humans and Nature by proclaiming 'We do not defend nature, we are the nature defending itself.' This cry situates itself 'after progress', in the sense that it can only be heard as a response to the triple ecological disaster diagnosed by Guattari, the destruction, deliberate or not, of the interdependent relationships between humans and their environments and within the environments themselves. And it does not resonate in a vacuum. From collective vegetable gardens to Zones to Defend, initiatives are multiplying where a culture of interdependence is being relearned. This apprenticeship

can be said to be involutionary because, in order to take root in experience, the lived meaning of interdependence requires from each a deliberate effort to consent, demanding that they set aside the right for each to 'decide for themselves' that modern people experience as their freedom.

We propose to call 'generative apparatuses'[3] collectively designed modes of assemblage that both presuppose and induce their participants' precursive trust in the capacity to make sense in common about situations that concern them. Some of these, such as the African palaver, have survived colonization. As for the contemporary US activists' consensus-making process, it has also older roots since it was inspired by the Quaker way of gathering 'Clearness committees' around concerns or questions experienced by community members. Such apparatuses exemplify the transformative efficacy the regeneration of an 'ecology of trust' might demand. Their aim is not to generate unanimous feelings but the involution of conflicting stances, each setting aside the claim to be the right one, and consenting to let the sense that others express something which also matters affect their own positioning. If an agreement is obtained, it will be an event that belongs to no one but may be received with gratitude, because it will have been generated with others, because of others, and at the risk of others.

Generative apparatuses break with the ideal of scalability and with the set of abstractions that thin the world. They are situational and enrooted. This is not to say that they divide and particularize, but that the communications they can generate will demand involutionary alliances, recalling Félix Guattari's catalytic reconquest, a processual creation of interlacing without confusion and without a pre-given definition of common interest and meaning.

In other words, to try to think 'after progress', in the perspective that we defend, is to think after the production of 'thin' individuals, who certainly know that they are dependent – nothing is more dependent than a modern individual – but suffer these dependencies as unfortunately necessary limitations to their freedom. But it is not dreaming of a reconciliation of Humans with Humans and with Nature. Just as ecological interdependencies do not meet any general definition, the ways in which humans can make themselves capable of cultivating and repopulating the areas of experience that modernity has devastated will not unify them. But they will cause them to diverge in ways that can become solidary, opening up a culture of partial connections[4] that demand to be ongoingly taken up again and nurtured.

In this sense, no unitary category should pretend to give us the 'right' perspective on the pluriverse in the making, be it that of a new materialism, of new ontologies or epistemologies that claim to be 'more-than-human'. Knowing that matter is active or accepting ourselves as 'more-than-human' does not mean that we experience it, and it will probably not be of much interest to those peoples who have managed to maintain a culture of relationships with the world they inhabit and belong to.

Perhaps, on the other hand, a deliberate and attentive use of what linguists call the middle voice could be relevant here, because the opposition between the active voice, which defines the syntactic subject of a statement as active, and the passive voice, which defines it as the object of action, is not suitable for involutionary becoming that is always 'between' heterogeneous terms. Letting oneself be touched by, solicited by, affected by, forced to feel and think by, and recognizing that we have been made capable of this

thanks to something other than ourselves, belongs to the middle voice. We need to cultivate a fabric of sociality that transforms our claims into practical stories of becoming with each other, thanks to each other and at the risk of each other.

But perhaps we also need to accept a test that speaks directly to our fear and horror of becoming a dupe: the question of the 'Other-than-human beings'.

Consenting to pluralism

The notion of 'progress' enclosed us alone in a thinned down, that is to say, disenchanted world. Today, we are beginning to conceive that the world could be populated by ways of feeling and making sense, both human and non-human, in which we participate and which require care and attention. But consenting to hear this requirement does not mean feeling at home in a re-enchanted world.

Feeling at home in a pluralist universe is an enticing prospect, maybe the ultimate trick of the relentless universalism which made the 'uniform course of nature' so dear to us. This is why we wish to evoke here, from far away, what, with Marisol de la Cadena (2015), we will call 'Other-than-human' beings. If there is a one question that the horror of becoming a dupe has ripped through, it is that of those 'Other-than-humans' reduced to primitive beliefs, to the catch-all of the supernatural, to the illusions that still bind collectives incapable of facing what remains, despite everything – human solitude. We may well become able to feel the dense network of mutual relations maintained by the trees of a forest, but what of the experience of feeling looked at by the forest, of being aware of it as an attentive and clear-sighted presence, who knows us and can shame us? Are we able not to just tolerate it as 'purely cultural'?

Seriously asking the question of 'Other-than-humans' seems to us necessary at a time when thinking 'after progress' demands from us a consent to make room. This does not mean 'ontological liberalism', because the proposal to put on the same footing, to recognize as equally existing everything that makes sense for humans, may irritate philosophers, but eschews the pragmatic test: what does this question of the 'Other-than humans' require of us, and not of humans in general? For it is we who have transformed the question 'does it really exist?', which can make sense in laboratories, into a general judgement operator. The involution we have associated with the Jamesian consent requires in this case the effort of putting aside our filiation haunted by the easy option of tolerance and of refusing as well to enter into abstract polemics about the existence that we would recognize of unicorns, for instance, or other centaurs that we encounter in contemporary scholastic discussions. For whom does the existence of unicorns actually matter? Who knows how to address them, what they ask, what name they answer to? Are there peoples who honour them and know how to sustain the relationship they demand?

Involution takes place between heterogeneous terms, not in the brains of sarcastic philosophers, but between visitors and people who know how to relate with Other-than-human beings. And it demands that we, modern visitors, recognize the limited character of the panoply of attitudes we may be tempted to adopt: ironical or voyeuristic distance, tolerant interpretation in terms of subjective cultural beliefs, or else mimetic leap that always risks exoticizing what one aims to share. Using the middle voice we would propose that visitors

might learn to let themselves be touched – not touched by Other-than-humans, but by the way in which they create obligations for 'their' people. This is what we would call a pragmatic proposition, refusing to go beyond the effects but focusing on the culture of these effects. Refusing, that is, the position of the good will settlers – the tolerance of those who know that they know better, even if they remain discreet about it. But also the voracity of spiritual tourists who think they can freely appropriate what they feel attracted by.

If biologists have allowed us to say that nothing is 'natural' in nature, that the living, on any scale, enter into relationships that could be said to be artificial in that they do not contradict general laws but deprive them of their power to explain and define, we must say here that the category of supernatural is as misplaced as that of natural. Other-than-humans do not ask to be recognized as 'supernatural' – as we know, it is the missionaries who understood them that way. They do not even ask that we believe that they 'really exist', if that means existing in a public way that every properly equipped human should be able to witness. As Donna Haraway firmly points out, 'animism cannot be donned like a magic cape by visitors' (Haraway, 2016, p. 89).

In other words, the Jamesian 'pluriverse in the making' does not respect the humanist adage par excellence: 'I am human and nothing that is human is foreign to me'. And it is no longer a question of accepting the need to learn how to weave relationships between divergent practical cultures, or to learn the arts of a composition that continue the dynamics of generative interdependence that have made the Earth fertile. We need to accept an involution of such a (secular) materialism into an 'animism' that Haraway, quoting Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, calls a 'sensible materialism' (Haraway, 2016, p. 88). And this means that, while we can say 'we are all "more than human"' to the extent that we can consent to a relationship of interdependence with our kins and symbionts, we cannot say 'we are all animists' when the relation with Other-than-human beings is concerned. Those beings make their own choices about who they will enter into relation with, including recruiting those they choose, be they willing or not. The pluriverse is thus streaked with relations that are recalcitrant to composition. Any precursive trust is misplaced here. Consenting to pluralism means accepting that we do not know.

Not to know does not mean to ignore. It asks for an apprenticeship that specifically concerns those who named themselves humans, an involution of our settled oppositions between what is and what is not possible. Consenting to sensible materialism demands, Haraway writes, 'a certain suspension of ontologies and epistemologies, holding them lightly, in favor of more venturesome, experimental natural histories' (Haraway, 2016, p. 88). To hold lightly and not to reject – this may evoke the two complementary ways that Niels Bohr associated with how blind persons can explore their environment with a stick. Holding it tight implies imposing active questions on that environment – does this resist pressure, i.e. in our case, does it satisfy the criteria for what 'really' exists? Holding it lightly means consenting to render oneself sensitive to what is being explored, including the 'gaps' that signal the partial nature of the connection (see M. de la Cadena, note 4 below). It is consenting to give it the power to touch us, but denying ourselves the power to define it, to categorize it, that is to say, to detach what touches us from the world that has cultivated the art of welcoming it. But we must then resist the fear that could lead our hand to tighten its grip on the stick, to restore the world where we are alone.

In his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James proceeds with a lightly held stick. He does not dispute that, held firmly, the stick of our interpretive categories leads to the conclusion that we have no reason to accept as 'true' what saints, mystics and ecstatic people report having seen or heard or perceived. What remains, however, is their experience itself, that of entering into a relationship with 'something greater'. And James asks that we let ourselves be touched by the fruits of this relationship, that we recognize that the saints, whatever their limitations and excesses, are 'the great torch-bearers, the tip of the wedge, the clearers of the darkness' (1985, p. 285). The charity they practised to the extreme has been, he writes, 'a genuinely creative social force, tending to make real a degree of virtue which it alone is ready to assume as possible' (p. 285). We have to recognize that 'without that over-trust in human worth which they show, the rest of us would lie in spiritual stagnancy' (p. 285).

However, this contact with 'something greater' has fruits which may well also inspire fear. Of course, the usual easy answer is to separate the 'true' saints from the fanatics, to whom we would be free to apply our interpretive categories. But why do we ask that the relationship with an Other-than-human entity should make us better? Peoples who have resisted the hold of universalist faiths know well that the relationship with these Others is not without risk, that they do not respond to our idea of benevolence. Above all, they must be appeased and can, if we forget that they are Others, turn into devouring powers. What if Alfred N. Whitehead was right about what Plato named Ideas giving us what we named our soul? In this case, we did not recognize those Other-than-humans who made us their people, and thus do not know how to relate with them. The fact that we are ready to kill (really or academically) in the name of Ideas then verifies Whitehead's warning about the Furies, 'the horrors lurking within [Ideas'] imperfect realization' (Whitehead, 1967, p. 148).

Be it as it may, the testimonies of religious experience that touched William James, as well as his own need for a God who would give meaning to human life as a real battle in which we are called to take part (James, 1979, p. 55), could indicate what we have to question in order to position ourselves 'after progress'. Why do we need that the experience of Others inhabiting this world should carry a call that turns those who respond to it into 'clearers of darkness', or that awakens us from our 'stagnancy'? Are not our worlds crying loud enough? Why not cultivate care, reverence or respect for the obligations associated with Others (including maybe our own Ideas) without lending them a privileged relationship with salvation? As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari wrote, 'It may be that believing in this world, in this life, becomes our most difficult task, or the task of a mode of existence still to be discovered on our plane of immanence today' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 75). Involution.

Funding

Notes

1. 'Existential territories' are part of Félix Guattari's metamodelization of the production of subjectivity developed in *Chaosmosis*. It is their implosion which articulates the triple ecological disaster (Guattari, 1995, p. 55).

2. This is what happened on 9/11 when the passengers of flight UA93, which had been diverted in the direction of Washington DC, learned by phone calls of the New York suicide attacks. Consenting to the fact that they had nothing to lose, they collectively attempted to take control of the plane. The plane crashed but the planned attack had failed.

3. The term apparatus, which is the usual translation of the French *dispositif*, often designates disciplinary apparatuses as analysed by Michel Foucault. We use the same term in order to pragmatically accentuate the involved contrast and complicate the critique of apparatuses as such. Each cultivation practice has its apparatuses and they deserve 'critical appreciation' not knee-jerk judgement.

4. Telling about her relationship with her Andean friend and co-worker Nazario Turpo, Marisol de la Cadena writes: 'Our worlds were not necessarily commensurable, *but* this did not mean we could not communicate. Indeed, we could, insofar as I accepted that I was going to leave something behind, as with any translation – or even better, that our mutual understanding was also going to be full of gaps that would be different for each of us, and would constantly show up, interrupting but not preventing our communication' (de la Cadena, 2015, p. xxv).

References

de la Cadena, M. (2015). *Earth beings*. Duke University Press.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1992). *A thousand plateaus*. Athlone Press.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1994). *What is philosophy?* Verso.

Gilbert, S. F., McDonald, E., Boyle, N., Buttino, N., Gyi, L., Mai, M., Prakash, N., & Robinson, J. (2010). Symbiosis as a source of selectable epigenetic variation: Taking the heat for the big guy. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, *365*, 671–678. doi:10.1098/rstb.2009.0245

Guattari, F. (1995). *Chaosmosis: An ethico-aesthetic paradigm*. Indiana University Press.

Guattari, F. (2000). *The three ecologies*. Athlone Press (Original work published 1989).

Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

Hustak, C., & Myers, N. (2012). Involutionary momentum: Affective ecologies and the sciences of plant/insect encounters. *Differences*, *23*(3), 74–118. doi:10.1215/10407391-1892907

James, W. (1950). *The principles of psychology* (Vol. *2*). Dover Publications.

James, W. (1977). *A pluralistic universe*. Harvard University Press.

James, W. (1979). *The will to believe*. Harvard University Press.

James, W. (1985). *The varieties of religious experience*. Harvard University Press.

Margulis, L., & Sagan, D. (1995). *What is life?* Simon & Schuster.

Savransky, M. (2021). *Around the day in eighty worlds*. Duke University Press.

Stengers, I. (2015). *In catastrophic times: Resisting the coming barbarism*. Open Humanities Press.

Tsing, A. (2015). *The mushroom at the end of the world*. Princeton University Press.

Whitehead, A. N. (1967). *Adventures of ideas*. The Free Press.

Author biographies

Didier Debaise is a permanent researcher at the Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique (FNRS) and Professor of Philosophy at the Free University of Brussels (ULB). His main areas of research are contemporary forms of speculative philosophy, theories of events, and links between American pragmatism and the French contemporary philosophy. He has written three books on Whitehead's philosophy (*Un empirisme spéculatif, Le vocabulaire de Whitehead* and *L'appât des possibles*). Two of his books appeared in English: *Nature as Event* (Duke University Press) and *A*

Speculative Empiricism (Edinburgh University Press). He is currently working on a new book, *Pragmatique de la terre.*

Isabelle Stengers is philosopher, Professor Emerita of the Université Libre de Bruxelles. She is concerned by the questions of scientific practices and related to the philosophy of Deleuze, Whitehead and James as well as to the anthropology of Latour and the SF thinking adventure of Haraway. Among her books published in English translation are: *Order out of Chaos* with Ilya Prigogine, *The Invention of Modern Science, Cosmopolitics I* and *II*, *Capitalist Sorcery* with Philippe Pignarre, *Thinking with Whitehead*, *In Catastrophic Times* and *Another Science is Possible.*