Stories of Earthly Things

For a Pragmatist approach of Geostories

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"Stories of Earthly Things. For a pragmatist approach of geostories"
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Didier Debaise

I would like to take up a proposal made by William James, in an incantatory and diffuse form: the universe would be constituted by the account of earthly things. This strange proposal, in which James saw the announcement of a new orientation of philosophy, did not have the expected effects. Its lapidary presence, in various forms, sometimes as a general metaphor allowing him to express his vision of the world, sometimes as a proposition concerning the nature of things themselves, sometimes as a convenient way of accounting for our modes of knowledge, undoubtedly played a role in the fact that James's readers did not see in it much more than an imaginary expression to which it would not be necessary to dwell on. James himself had left it without further developments, leaving it to his readers to eventually take it up and complete it. I think that this proposal, far from being an imaginary form of expression, of belonging only to a very local and circumscribed aspect of reality, must be taken literally as an affirmation of the nature of things and of the universe. It is a question, as I would like to show it here, by completing James' proposal, of thinking terrestrial things as narratives properly speaking, and to follow, from these, the composition of a universe.

In James's major work, *Pragmatism*, we find two essential passages that attest to the importance and the meaning he gives to the notion of story. These two passages are found in a chapter entitled "The One and the Many" in which James lays down the elements of what he calls a "pluralistic universe". The first passage is the most important insofar as it gives the general vision that James has when he intends to make narrative a central element of a new way of thinking about the world: "The world is full of partial

stories that run parallel to one another, beginning and ending at odd times. They mutually interlace and interfere at points, but we can not unify them completely in our minds (James, 1975b: 71). This vision of a world "full of partial stories" may seem at first sight, in its content, rather trivial. James would like to affirm the importance of the multiplicity of stories that humans tell about beings, things and events in the world. A classical vision where there would be, on the one hand, the silent space of what he calls the "earthly things", this space of nature which would be deprived of everything that makes up a narrative, namely the dramatic sense, the sense of importance, of values, of hesitations and attachments; and then, on the other hand, the place of meaning, of language, of intentions, of desires, of heterogeneous values, that is to say, the space of the humans, of those who tell and make up stories. One could therefore think that James' originality would be at most to complexify a classical opposition in modernity. His novelty would be to blur the lines of demarcation between the domain of silent things and that of language. This reading, if we take the quoted passage, is possible, but it seems to me that it misses the point. I think, on the contrary, that this passage of James, far from taking up, while complicating it, the classical opposition between nature and the human world, aims at rejecting it from top to bottom. Let us take this passage in its literalness and in its radicality. James takes a position on a very general question, namely what makes up the "world", what composes the world as such, and it is within this question that the formula appears according to which it would be made of "partial stories". Far from referring to a relationship between human subjects and the world, the primary claim to which James identifies the narrative is the more ontological one of designating the fabric, the material of which the world itself is made. This is confirmed, moreover, by the end of the passage I quoted, where it is said that "our minds cannot make them coincide completely". By affirming this, James implies that it is the human mind that somehow comes after these stories, that it collects and articulates them; in short, that it depends on them, rather than being their creator and origin.

All this is confirmed by the second passage to which I would like to refer in order to think about this vision that we could call an ontology of the narrative: "Things tell a story. Their parts hang together so as to work out a climax. They play into each other's hands expressively. Retrospectively, we can see that although no definite purpose presided over a chain of events, yet the events fell into a dramatic form,

with a start, a middle, and a finish" (James, 1975b: 70). No more ambiguity is possible. James intends to make the narrative an essential component of the existence of things themselves. It is each thing that tells a story in the manner of the stories we are most familiar with, with their dramatic intensities, their contingencies, the happy or tragic endings of their existences and the values they transmit. James knows that such a vision is not self-evident and that it opposes a long tradition that has distanced us from the narrative of "earthly things". Thus, when he writes: "The center of gravity of philosophy must therefore alter its place. The earth of things, long thrown into shadow by the glories of the upper ether, must resume its rights" (James, 1975b: 62) James' proposal becomes clearer. It implies a change in the "center of gravity of philosophy" in order to leave room for the accounts of "the earth of things", for what I would call, following Haraway, geostories. Haraway introduces this notion, through a contrast with B. Latour, in *Staying with the trouble:* "Searching for compositionist practices capable of building effective new collectives, Latour argues that we must learn to tell 'Gaïa stories.' If that word is too hard, then we can call our narrations 'geostories,' in which 'all the former props and passive agents have become active without, for that, being part of a giant plot written by some overseeing entity.' (Haraway, 2016: 40).

THE STORY INSIDE THINGS

The question is then to know how "earthly things", which James does not want to interpret only from the language that humans would use to describe them, can tell stories. I propose to answer this question by tracing the genesis of James' thinking about stories; this seems to me to be all the more important since James passes through hypotheses, influences, and theoretical resources that are quite similar to those that have influenced those who, today, assert the importance of thinking about non-human narratives on their own behalf[1]. It is obviously not a question of retracing, in a more or less

[1] I am thinking mainly of the works that have been developed in the environmental humanities such as those of D. Bird Rose (cf. *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction,* Virginia, University of Virginia Press, 2011), of T. Van Dooren (cf. *The Wake of Crows: Living and Dying in Shared Worlds,* New York, Columbia University Press, 2019*),* in natural history, such as that of Stephen Jay Gould (cf. *The Flamingo's Smile: Reflections in Natural History,* New York, W W Norton & Co Inc, 1985), in anthropology, such as that of A. Tsing (cf. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins,* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021) and in

exhaustive way, the elements of this path, but of highlighting the components of an idea that has developed from a certain type of experience.

Thus, in his first book, the *Principles of Psychology*, James intends to show that it is impossible to ignore natural history when dealing with psychic states, the nervous system and the brain as the material support of states of consciousness. The nervous system, he writes, "like all other organs… evolves from ancestor to descendant" (James, 1950a: 79) and emotions are comparable to species in Darwin: "The trouble with the emotions in psychology is that they are regarded too much as absolutely individual things. So long as they are set down as so many eternal and sacred psychic entities, like the old immutable species in natural history, so long all that can be done with them is reverently to catalogue their separate characters, points, and effects. But if we regard them as products of more general causes (as 'species' are now regarded as products of heredity and variation), the mere distinguishing and cataloguing becomes of subsidiary importance" (James, 1950b: 449). This first encounter with Darwinism is absolutely fundamental for understanding how the idea that natural things tell stories came about. Indeed, by introducing natural history at the level of emotions, James makes them beings whose existence is inseparable from a history, made of variations, selections, alternatives, of which they bear the marks and independently of which they would only have an abstract meaning, emptied of any real content. We could say the same thing about the nervous system, which is inseparable in its functioning, in its characteristics and effects, from a historical genesis, linking it to a history of the living, made of spontaneous variations, singular events, selections by the environment, diverse bifurcations. The history from which they come and of which they express the existence in their own being does not imply an act of recomposition by the mind. It is rather inscribed in their very reality, inseparable from their existence. It is undoubtedly the first moment when James has the intuition, in a still inchoate, unnamed form, that things tell stories, that is to say that they are made up of signs, traces, residues of a history that goes far beyond their current existence and links them by a thousand beams to beings that have preceded them, and to others taken in

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the sciences studies, such as that of I. Stengers (cf. *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism,* Open Humanity Press, 2015), D. Haraway (cf. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene,* Duke, Duke University Press, 2016) and V. Despret (cf. *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*, Minnesota, Minnesota University Press, 2016).

different directions. The place of origin of this intuition is important, but it does not delimit the question of narratives to a particular domain. James poses it at other levels, first in the life sciences in general and, from one step to the next, he generalizes it to all forms of existence, going so far as to apply it to forms that seem to us to be the furthest from "earthly things", namely ideas, representations, theories and even what he calls the "categories" of common sense.

What happens when we move from the *stories about things*, which is essentially the narrative that humans project onto silent things, supposedly unaware of them, to the *stories within the things*? What narratives do these beings tell that form so many singular perspectives on the world and on other existences? When we place ourselves in this regime of the signs, the traces, the intrinsic struggles that each existence carries with it, inscribed in its very existence, we deal with narratives of a particular kind. How to qualify them in their diversity? What could there be in common between the narrative of a living body, of an organ, of a cell, of the nervous system, and why not - James did not hesitate to go down this road - the narrative of a physical reality? In other words: to which dimensions of beings does the narrative give their rights? What do these narratives make salient? They tell, in the diversity of the forms of existence, stories that I would qualify above all as precarious. The word precariousness gathers here two distinct meanings that I would like to place at the center of a thought of the narratives. Firstly, by precariousness we must understand the fact that every being depends on innumerable other beings to maintain itself in existence, that it requires a set of elements that support it, provide its resources, participate directly or indirectly in its survival. James sees through each existence, from the most ephemeral, from the most fragile to the most robust, the immense network of beings on which it depends and independently of which it would never have come into existence and could not maintain itself for a single moment. Cells depend on the associated organic medium which provides them with the chemical elements essential to their constitution; organisms depend on the mineral, vegetable, atmospheric and organic resources, which are at work both in their development and in their maintenance; rocks form consolidated physical, organic and mineral materials. Everywhere James sees the fabric of the dependences from which the beings come and which maintains itself throughout their existence. He expresses it notably in a chapter of *A Pluralistic Universe* in which he pays homage to the philosopher

Gustav Fechner, the author of *Nanna. Or the soul of plants* and *Elements of psychophysics*: "All the things on which we externally depend for life - air, water, plant and animal food, fellow men, etc. - are included in her as her constituents parts. She is self-sufficing in a million respects in which we are not so. We depend on her for almost everything, she on us for but a small portion of her history" (James, 1977: 73). James represents the earth as an immense focus of co-dependencies, forming a precarious balance where each being is both a resource and an agent of transformation. What the beings relate is the fragile chain of their dependencies. As Latour recently wrote in a very similar vein: "Terrestrials in fact have the very delicate problem of discovering how many *other beings* they need in order to subsist. It is by making this list that they sketch out their *dwelling places* (the expression allows us to shift away from the word 'territory,' a word too often limited to the simple administrative grid of a state)" (Latour, 2018: 87). The simple transformation, disappearance or addition of one of the links of this chain has vital implications for its existence. It is not only beings that are precarious and fragile, but each part of the chain on which they depend. Certainly, James could not think in all its consequences the fragility of what we now call multispecific relationships, but his thought of precarious co-dependencies is not so far from what Anna Tsing notes in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*: "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 multispecies world making" (Tsing, 2015: 22).

Second, this extreme fragility of beings, which their stories transmit, is also essentially a sense of their contingency. Contingency is not a secondary characteristic of beings, of the stories they carry, and of the ways in which we can relate to them. Contingency is the great principle of all existence. It would be necessary to say of James' thought what Deleuze and Guattari affirmed as the center of all geophilosophy: "The principle of reason such as it appears in philosophy is a principle of contingent reason and is put like this: there is no good reason but contingent reason; there is no universal history except of contingency" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009: 93). In the body of each living being, in the composition of each cell, in the objects, in the very categorizations of our experience, in our theories and our stories, we find this intensity, almost "dramatic" as James calls it, that it could have been otherwise,

that another trajectory of existence could have taken place. What the stories tell is this sense of "could have", this radical sense of contingency. James had already been made sensitive to this by natural history, marked by successive bifurcations in the history of living beings, by the contingency of the relations between living beings and their environment, by the fluctuations of resources and predatory activities, by the mobile and plastic zones of contact between organisms, but he nevertheless extends the meaning. For each living being, each body, each being, there is like a halo of unrealized possibilities that accompanies it, the traces of what it could have been and that give a very particular meaning to what it has become. They are possibilities incarnated in its being. At such a moment a variation in his environment could have given a whole other history, a change even tiny in its networks of dependence could have modified its existence. In the manner of Whitehead, who was a great reader of James, it would be necessary to say of every being that it "bears on itself the scars of its birth; it recollects as a subjective emotion its struggle for existence; it retains the impress of what it might have been, but it is not" (Whitehead, 1978: 226-227).

James was a great reader of Renouvier, the inventor of the term "uchrony" (Renouvier, 1988), who had made this question of alternatives, of the unrealized possibilities of which the events bear the trace, a true method of analysis of historical events. Presenting "uchrony" as a "utopia in history", Renouvier rewrote the history of Europe by imagining what it could have been if the Roman emperors had banished the Christians from the East. Uchrony, which aims at imagining another course of history, is not a purely imaginative exercise, free from the events as they took place; it consists in starting from the alternatives, linked to the fragility of a historical moment, inscribed in the events as they took place. What Renouvier had thought at the level of political, social and historical events, James thinks it notably at the level of natural history, a fragile and contingent history where each species carries with it the traces of the other trajectories that it could have taken, the traces of another history. But these "could have" are not limited to natural history either, they become with James a central dimension of existence in general. The pluralist universe, to which James appeals, is a universe of contingencies, as much at the level of the beings that carry with them the traces of the fact that they could not have been, as of the relations that they maintain

with each other and that could always be different. It is a universe that James qualifies following F. C. S. Schiller as "plastic".

MODES OF ATTENTION

If stories are everywhere in things, if the earth is an immense fabric of interconnected narratives, forming through their interactions a plural world, why insist, in the form of an injunction, that it would be vital to give them back their rights? It is because for James this narrative of things has been somehow obstructed; we would have lost the meaning of it. It is not a question of making a history of the experience of the world by identifying the moment when the narrative of things would have become inaudible, being able to lead us towards a nostalgic vision in search of a more authentic moment. The problem that James poses is different: how could a certain articulation of knowledge, a fascination for certain categories of thought, an overvaluation of certain abstractions have produced a distancing from these earthly things? It is the constitution of what one could call, following Bruno Latour, a thought "outside the ground". This form of thought is constituted from notions such as "objectivity", "neutrality" and "disinterested knowledge". James paid particular attention, notably in his book *The Will to Believe*, to the invention of these categories of thought, to the postures in which they put the one who invokes them, to the relations they induce with experience. He does not seek to reject them as fallacious or unfounded. He sees them as abstractions that were invented in order to link important parts of experience, to amplify them, to give them a new meaning, but that ended up turning empty and disqualifying the things to which they were supposed to bring new attention: "It is but the old story, of a useful practice first becoming a method, then a habit, and finally a tyranny that defeats the end it was used for. Concepts, first employed to make things intelligible, are clung to even when they make them unintelligible" (James, 1977: 99). These abstractions have ended up producing a growing estrangement, responsible for this indifference to the accounts of earthly things. Thus, to give place again to these narratives does not go without the weakening of abstractions which present themselves as natural and which were however the fruit of a recent and contingent history entraining a mode of thought out of ground.

This history crystallizes around a model of knowledge that we inherit and that James designates as "saltatory". The "saltatory" knowledge with which we have come to identify knowledge itself functions by leaps, as if the act of knowing consisted in crossing the gap that separates a knowing subject from an object supposed to be at a distance. Inheritors of this invention, we think not only of knowledge, but of all our modes of experience, as a way of jumping between what should be familiar to us and what presents itself as foreign and distant. Thus, we get lost in a series of false problems that appear to us as absolutely decisive: how could two consciousnesses know each other? What guarantees could we have that our knowledge corresponds to the real things that they have as their object? How could my personal experience relate to the equally personal experience of another subject? How can I know the world? But are we so sure that we are so separate from what we experience? How did we come to think that natural things, for example, were so far removed from us? For James, we have it all backwards. The question is not how we could cross the gap that would separate us from other beings, how we could leap beyond our experience to join others, physical, biological, vegetal, for example. The question is rather to know how the separation was introduced.

What seems to me so essential in James' analysis is that it allows us to understand that the distance of things is not natural and given, but that it is the result of an invention, a fabrication, which comes to deny, point by point, the relations, to erase all the existing connections between the beings themselves. We create distance to then ask ourselves how to connect what we have separated and we are then left with this game of permanent jumps from one place to another, from one existence to another. It is in his book *The Meaning of Truth* that he deploys it with the most clarity: "The most general way of contrasting my view of knowledge with the popular view (which is also the view of most epistemologists) is to call my view ambulatory, and the other view saltatory; and the most general way of characterizing the two views is by saying that my view describes knowing as it exists concretely, while the other view only describes its results abstractly taken." (James, 1975a: 79-80). Our experience is not at first separate and then connected; on the contrary, it is essentially connected, through a thousand intermediaries that go from one reality to another. James opposes to the saltatory vision a knowledge of another kind, more concrete, which he calls "ambulatory". We do not jump, by an act of knowledge, from a subject to an

object, but we circulate from one to the other by the whole of the intermediaries that connect us to it: "Cognition, whenever we take it concretely, means determinate 'ambulation,' through intermediaries, from a terminus a quo to, or towards, a terminus ad quem" (James, 1975a: 81). Between a living being and another, there is not a vacuum that is only made available by secondary and derived representations, but a zone of the co-dependences, of the relations that they maintain between them and with the other living beings, all these intermediaries that form a continuous chain going from the one to the other. The ambulatory knowledge is this circulation around and with the earthly things. In a certain way it only adds a new narrative to the narratives of beings; it assembles and connects existing but overlapping narratives.

What, then, is this function of ambulatory knowledge? Is it a way of receiving the narrative of "earthly things"? Does it aim at reproducing in knowledge the modalities of existence of the things with which we deal? In short, is ambulatory knowledge a way of naming, without adding anything to it, what would otherwise constitute everything, namely the web of dependencies and the set of contingencies from which they come? This function is twofold and is by no means limited to a reproduction or a simple repetition of narratives. It is first of all a process of resistance to the off-ground attractors of saltatory knowledge; it reweaves at the very level of thoughts, ideas and abstractions, the contingent histories from which they originate; it resituates them in their environment and gives them back their operative and pragmatic dimensions. How were constituted notions such as "objectivity", "axiological neutrality", "cognitive distance", "disinterested knowledge"? To what operative needs did they respond? In what environment and under what conditions did they find their effectiveness and their reason for being? The ambulatory knowledge puts in account the knowledge itself, it releases the precariousness and the contingency of it in front of the pretensions of certain attractors to place us out of ground, at a distance of the earthly things. It is thus a thought which wants to be essentially terrestrial, attached to the vital dependences of existence, resisting any form of transcendence and linking in an inextricable way the thought, the abstractions and the terrestrial dimensions of the existence. In this sense, it is fully in line with what Deleuze and Guattari affirmed as a requirement at the opening of the "geophilosophy" chapter of *What is philosophy?* : "Subject and object give a poor approximation of thought. Thinking is neither a

line drawn between subject and object nor a revolving of one around the other. Rather, thinking takes place in the relationship of territory and the earth" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009: 85)[2].

It is then a mode of attention to the fragility of things. By tracing their lines of dependence and by imagining the zones of contingencies which are associated with them, it releases the most eventful dimension of it and it intensifies the value of it: "We build the flux out inevitably. The great question is: does it, with our additions, rise or fall in value? Are the additions worthy or unworthy?" (James, 1975b: 122-123)

CONCLUSION

I have tried to take up James's injunction that we should give space to accounts of earthly things. This injunction would be trivial if it were not linked to a pluralistic conception of the universe, the form of which James expresses as opposed to the constitution of a world above ground: "It follows that whoever says that the whole world tells one story utters another of those monistic dogmas that a man believes at his risk. It is easy to see the world's history pluralistically, as a rope of which each fibre tells a separate tale; but to conceive of each cross-section of the rope as an absolutely single fact, and to sum the whole longitudinal series into one being living an undivided life, is harder" (James, 1975b: 70)

The world to which James appeals is a world in fluctuating and growing composition. The beings, plural, in the manner of the "carets" of a rope, constitute each one a world which is articulated to the

[2] In this sense, the notion of "geostories" is intended to designate modes of thought in the obvious extension of geophilosophy such as Deleuze and Guattari have posited. Let us recall that the concept was forged following the "école des annales", and more particularly the work of F. Braudel who had proposed the notion of "geo-history" to designate the fundamental links between historical events and territories, geographical organization, ecological resources, maritime networks, etc. Deleuze and Guattari paid homage to Braudel's work (see for example: F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, California, University of California Press, 1996) and took up his demands. What Braudel had done at the level of history, Deleuze and Guattari intended to do at the level of philosophy, of its conditions of appearance, of its futures, of its links to the times in which it developed, and finally of its function. A similar ambition can be found in other fields of knowledge, notably in anthropology, in science studies, in environmental humanities, where the question of other modes of thought, other ways of considering knowledge practices, in the form of narratives, are linked to questions of territories, ecological relationships, and ways of inhabiting the earth. This is why, alongside geo-histories and geo-philosophies, an essential place must be given to geo-stories.

other carets. There is no underlying unity of a preordained world whose contours they would each express; no finality to which they would tend and which would give to their diversity a common horizon. The world, if we want to speak about it in the singular, is not the origin, the source nor the end of any thing. It is the effect of the multiple interactions between these earthly things that we can think of as "personal lives (which may be of any grade of complication, and superhuman or infra humans as well as human), variously cognitive of each other (…), genuinely evolving and changing by effort and trial, and by their interaction and cumulative achievements making up the world" (James, 1920: 443-444). It is a world that is essentially precarious and contingent in each of its parts and that calls for a special attention to which the fiction of a natural world odorless, colorless, insipid, a coming and going of matter, incessant and insignificant on which we would project the values, the aesthetic dimensions and the promises that would be missing. Everything is said in the narratives of earthly things, but it is up to us to articulate them, to intensify their meaning and to accompany the possibilities that they carry with them; in short, to invent new ones that define us as earthly things, among others.

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