The Pluralistic Problematic
William James and the Pragmatics of the Pluriverse

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Abstract:

In his lectures on Pragmatism, William James famously proposed that the question of "the one and the many" constitutes the most central of all philosophic problems, and that it is "central because so pregnant." Prompted by James' proposition, this article explores the intimately political connection in James's thought between his pluralistic metaphysics and the nature of the problematic as a generative force that impregnates worlds and thoughts with differences: what I here call "the pluralistic problematic". Exploring the generative significance of the problematic in James's philosophy, I propose that, where James is concerned, the pluriverse has a thoroughly problematic mode of existence. And pluralism, rather than a celebration of the many, rather than a philosophical exposition on multiple worlds and ontologies, or a theory of the organisation of a diverse polis, is first and foremost a pragmatics of the pluriverse– a political, experimental and pragmatic response to the ongoing insistence of the pluralistic problematic.

Keywords: William James, Problematic, Pluralism, Pluriverse, Difference, Pragmatism

> "A conception of the world arises in you somehow, no matter how."
>
> William James

Introduction: Or, The Many and The One

The question of pluralism, of "The One and The Many", as he would often refer to it, was arguably William James' overriding philosophical preoccupation: embedded, with varying degrees of elaboration –and perhaps, with varying degrees of awareness– in his entire psychology, his work on belief and religious experience, his articulation of pragmatism, in the development of his radical empiricism, his experiments in psychical research, and crucially, in his anti-imperialistic politics (on the latter see Livingston, 2016). If "philosophies paint pictures", James was determined to honour the "picture of the irredeemably pluralistic evolution of things, achieving unity by experimental methods, and getting it in different shapes and degrees and in general only as a last resort", for it was this image that had provided "the chief patterns in this world-picturing industry of [his]" (1988: 3-5). And while a certain pluralistic evolution of things had been brewing in James' thought since early on, it was especially in the wake of the Spanish-American War, the American annexation of the Philippines, and the reaction in the US to the Dreyfus affair, that this world-picturing activity acquired distinct political urgency. Indeed, whereas he would've once lauded the US as an example of a pluralism in the making, its growing imperialist and corporativist tendencies, historian Deborah Coon (1996: 71) has shown, prompted James to become "increasingly distressed by the direction American society seemed to be taking."

Thus, at a time when he thought a systematic contribution to philosophy was in order, he performed a pluralistic inversion on the terms of the ancient problem and chose *The Many and the One* as the title of that philosophical treatise on the concept of pure experience that he hoped to

complete one day; a systematic philosophy which would remain forever unfinished (James, 1988). It is therefore hardly controversial to suggest that pluralism became James' *problem:* it grew up "in [his] mind gradually, as one detail after another seemed so to fall into its most natural place" (James, 1988: 4). These details kept falling in place to the point that, starting his career as a physiologist, then psychologist, it was the call to dramatize the manifold nature of the world in the face of its imperial "monification" that made philosophy impossible for him to turn his back on with impunity, turning *him* instead into a thinker that "philosophizes as the lover loves" (James, 1988: 3). For James, the problem of the one and the many might not have yet captured people's attention, but it had nevertheless acquired the character of an imperative to which he was forced to respond. As he put it in a momentous passage in his *Pragmatism*:

> I wish to turn its [the pragmatic method's] light upon the ancient problem of 'the one and the many.' I suspect that in but few of you has this problem occasioned sleepless nights, and I should not be astonished if some of you told me it had never vexed you. I myself have come, by long brooding over it, to consider it the most central of all philosophic problems, *central because so pregnant.* (James, 1975: 64)

In a sense, the entire concern of the present article revolves around this passage, around its generative provocation concerning problems as impregnators of divergent thoughts and worlds, around what I see as an intimate –if often subliminal– connection in James between pluralism and the nature of the problematic: what I shall call *the pluralistic problematic.* But it is not the aim of this article simply to provide a historical exegesis of the development of James' thought. While some of his most distinguished contemporary exegetes continue to sustain that James provides us with "little discussion of social issues that appear central at present" (e.g. Campbell, 2017: 215), in this article I make a radically divergent proposition. I suggest that if the pluralistic problematic remains both pregnant and

imperative today it is because it also haunts *our* epoch: a desolate present marked by the deleterious histories of modern "progress" and capitalist accumulation, Western colonialism and ecological devastation, as well as by the ongoing and unfinished efforts of collectives and practices –in and out of Europe– thanks to which this endangered Earth, at once singular and multiple, has yet to take its last breath, is yet to be turned into a single, utterly uninhabitable order.

It is perhaps a hopeful sign that, in the midst of these eschatological times in which the modern proclamation of an origin to all origins reveals itself in profound intimacy with the insinuation of an end to all endings, we are also witness to a reactivation of new epistemological and ontological pluralisms which affirm that a multiplicity of "afters" to this ending might still be possible, even in the ruins of our ongoing present (see for instance, Danowski & Viveiros de Castro, 2016; Haraway, 2017; Savransky, 2017a; Tsing, 2017; Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017). In our epoch, the centrality of the problem of the one and the many is already more-than-philosophical. And as these various efforts begin, once again, to release pluralism from the shackled trajectory it enjoyed within the grooves of twentieth century Western political theory (on this see Ferguson, 2007);[i] and as the possibility of a *pluriverse* –that most generative of Jamesian inventions– bears itself witness to something of a revival, giving a chance to the task of cultivating "a world of many worlds" (De la Cadena & Blaser, 2018; cf. Reiter, 2018); I propose in what follows that we turn to James, not as a return to origins, but as one turns to a generative problematic that insists and persists, that demands to be *relayed* anew once again, always a little differently.

Indeed, what does James mean by the "problem of the one and the many" being so *pregnant*, and therefore central to philosophy? Immediately after the quote above, he provides a distinctly pragmatic answer: "I mean by this that if you know whether a man is a decided monist or a decided pluralist, you perhaps know more about the rest of his opinions than if you give him any other name ending in *ist.* To believe in the one or in the many, that is the classification with the maximum number of consequences." (James, 1975: 64) This entire passage, initial provocation and humorous response, is at once illuminating and perilously misleading. It is illuminating because, as I hope to show, in it

transpires the glimmer of what is a uniquely fertile relationship: that between problems as generative impregnators of difference in the world, and pragmatism as a philosophic attitude fundamentally concerned with the differences the problematic creates.

Nevertheless, perhaps because of the highly provocative tone of the *Pragmatism* lectures, his response, if characteristically humorous, also risks being misleading. In the first instance, it risks being misleading because, as I pointed out above, for James the pluralistic problematic was never *just* philosophical either. Yes, the nature of the problem demanded philosophical tools to be addressed, it required him to *become* a philosopher. But those patterns that forced him to address it, over which he brooded for so long, "are drawn from the mental and social spheres of life", and they are drawn from them not least because both mental and social life are notoriously fraught with problems– they "are at all times a strange blending of purpose, accident, and passive drift. […] No man, no nation, ever carried out a plan foretold in all its details. No consciousness ever embraced in a single act of thought the whole of either an individual or a national life." (James, 1988: 5)

But there is more. Because the picture of a pluralistic universe that James was at pains to conjure was the result not of abstract philosophical plans, but of that "strange blending" of purpose, accident, and drift that he called the "precipitousness" of experience (James, 1907), his aforementioned response to the question of the pregnancy of the problem of the one and the many risks being *doubly* misleading. For while it presents the contrast between the one and the many, monism and pluralism, as an "either/or", a bifurcating path, as a matter of determining *whether* one is a decided monist *or* a decided pluralist, the effect of the pragmatic approach James develops in response to this problem –not least in this very same lecture– is both to problematise the choice, and to associate pluralism itself with the *problematisation* of this choice. Which is to say, to characterise pluralism as a form of *staying* with the problem and of affirming its generativity– neither absolutely One, nor absolutely Many, the world is *both* one *and* many, "one just so far as its parts hang together by any definite connexion", it is "many just so far as any definite connexion fails to obtain", and "it

is growing more and more unified" or pluralised "by those systems of connexion at least which human energy keeps framing as time goes on." (James, 1975: 76)

One *and* many, ongoing *and* unfinished– like mental and social life, James's "world of pure experience" discloses its own intrinsic precipitousness. Indeed, I propose that, where James is concerned, the pluriverse has a *thoroughly problematic mode of existence.* Enjoying no absolute foundations, it insists and persists as a generative buzzing of myriad differences, frictions and transitions, an ongoing and unfinished blending of purpose, accident and drift. And rather than an absolute celebration of the many, rather than a philosophical exposition on multiple worlds and ontologies, or a theory of the organisation of a diverse polis, pluralism is first and foremost a *pragmatics of the pluriverse*– a political, experimental and pragmatic *response* to the ongoing insistence of the pluralistic problematic. One that troubles any philosophical effort to dissolve in abstractions the generative problem that animates it. One that resists any political attempt to turn the pluriverse into a single order.

In what sense might one say, then, that the pluriverse is intrinsically problematic, that it exists in the form of a problem that affords no definite solution, no perpetual peace, but an ongoing and unfinished, pragmatic experimentation with the possible consequences opened up by the divergences it generates? What is the nature of "the problematic" in James' thought, and its connection to pluralism, that would warrant such a proposition? This is an important yet demanding question, because to my mind it would be something of a stretch to claim that James *had* a philosophical concept of "problems" or "the problematic"; at least in the conventional sense in which one might claim that a philosopher "has" a concept or idea– a sense that would create the expectation of some technical and focused attention, and some degree of explicit, systematic articulation.

But this does not mean that a certain *sense* of the problematic, and a particularly Jamesian one at that, is not at play throughout his work. Indeed, I would go as far as to suggest that, rather than *have* a concept of the problematic, it was the problematic that *had him.* Such a suggestion might seem far-fetched, but it ceases being entirely outrageous when one considers that James did briefly risk,

early on, a *psychological* characterisation of the problematic, one that may perhaps also say something of his own relationship to it. In *The Principles of Psychology* (1890: 259. emphasis added), in the midst of his famous chapter on "The Stream of Thought", James suggested that "[i]n all voluntary thinking there is some topic or subject about which all the members of the thought revolve. *Half the time this topic is a problem*, a gap we cannot yet fill with a definite picture, word, or phrase, but which, in the manner described some time back, influences us in an intensely active and determinate psychic way. Whatever may be the images and phrases that pass before us, we feel their relation to this aching gap. *To fill it up is our thought's destiny*." I would propose that what I am now tentatively calling "the pluralistic problematic" may well have become the destiny of James' thought. Under its influence, James did articulate a profoundly radical pluralistic philosophy of experience. But just as a systematic account of the latter escaped him, remained irresolvable, unfinished, so did its relation to a more-than-psychological characterisation of the problematic itself, remaining "constantly felt in the fringe", forcing his thought to "swim in a felt fringe of relations" that persistently threw "a mantel of felt affinity over such representations, entering the mind, as suit it, and tingeing with the feeling of tediousness or discord all those with which it has no concern." (James 1890: 259) As I hope to suggest, it is probably no coincidence that James' very last book was titled *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1996a), effectively providing the beginning of an introduction to metaphysics by way of an experimentation with generative, ongoing and unfinished problems.

The One Who Walks Away from Chautauqua: Or, What Makes Life Significant?

It is therefore the task of those of us thinking *after* James, to risk the attempt of dramatising this open, aching gap, of making it resonate, of responding to the possibles it creates. Looking for help amongst the pragmatists, it is to John Dewey's (1938: 34) work on experimental logic and the theory of inquiry, for instance, that one might be tempted to turn for such a conceptualisation of the problematic. And one would certainly find it there, where he characterises it as an indeterminate,

disturbing phase of "tensional activity" out of which inquiry proper grows. Dewey's conceptualisation of the problematic as a metastable state of generative tension that propels inquiring activities is an undoubtedly fertile one. And given his naturalistic understanding of inquiry itself, one cannot help noticing the profound intercontinental resonances reverberating between his pragmatic account of the problematic, and the way in which such a notion developed in some participants of the French tradition, such as Gilbert Simondon (2005), Gilles Deleuze (1994), or even Étienne Souriau (2015).

As I read it, however, Dewey alone cannot quite make the *pluralistic* problematic resonate– because he was, at best, a *reluctant* pluralist. For all the other merits of his *The Public and Its Problems* (1954: 126), where he seeks to develop an account of the modern political condition as a pluralism of publics, he reverts at key moments to a negative conception of problems which leads him, like many of his liberal successors, to admit the *fact* of the plurality of publics but also to find that fact regrettable, suggesting that modern political problems are so copious and complex that "there are too many publics and too much public concern for our existing resources to cope with." Thus, writing insightfully about the "descent" of pluralism in political theory after James, Kennan Ferguson (2007: 15) writes that, since Dewey and others, pluralism "has been shifted from a promise to a problem." I would suggest, by contrast, that the opposite is in fact the case. From an ongoing response to a problematic that generatively impregnates the world with differences, pluralism has been turned into the promise of overcoming an unfortunate *obstacle,* turning difference into a mere shadow of a perfected, unified society. As such, Dewey's political theory of publics is effectively moved by what the problematic mode of existence of the Jamesian pluriverse *rejects*, namely, the appeal to a transcendence, a "Great Community" that would unify divergent publics and therefore provide a solution capable of *overcoming* their plurality.[ii]

Incidentally, it is in James's reflections on his lived rejection of one such Great Community that one finds a dramatic instance of this generative sense of the pluralistic problematic which recurs throughout his work. In an essay intriguingly titled "What Makes Life Significant?", James (1907)

begins by relating his experience of visiting, in 1896, the Chautauqua Assembly, a methodist educational retreat established in the 1870s. James (1907: 270) "went in curiosity for a day" but ended up "staying for a week, held spell-bound by the charm and ease of everything, the middle-class paradise, without a sin, without a victim, without a blot, without a tear". Upon setting foot in "that sacred enclosure", he wrote, "one feels one's self in an atmosphere of success. Sobriety and industry, intelligence and goodness, orderliness and ideality, prosperity and cheerfulness, pervade the air. It is a serious and studious picnic on a gigantic scale." (1907: 268)

At first, he had nothing but praise for Chautauqua. James (1907: 270) was effectively enchanted by what he thought was "a foretaste of what human society might be, were it all in the light, with no suffering and no dark corners." As he put it:

> Here you have a town of many thousands of inhabitants, beautifully laid out in the first and drained, and equipped with means for satisfying all the necessary lower and most of the superfluous higher wants of man. You have a first-class college in full blast. You have magnificent music – a chorus of seven hundred voices, with possibly the most perfect open-air auditorium in the world. You have every sort of athletic exercise from sailing, rowing, swimming, bicycling, to the ball-field and the more artificial doings which the gymnasium afford. You have kindergartens and model secondary schools. You have general religious services and special club-houses for the several sects. You have perpetually running soda-water fountains, and daily popular lectures by distinguished men. You have the best of company and yet no effort. You have no zygotic diseases, no poverty, no drunkenness, no crime, no police. You have culture, you have kindness, you have cheapness, you have equality, you have the best fruits what marking had fought and sstriven for under the name of civilisation for centuries. (James 1907: 269-270)

James's account of Chautauqua bears remarkable similarities to Ursula K. Le Guin's (2016) description of "Omelas", a SF, unbelievably joyous city that is the object of her famous philosophical fiction, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas". There too one would find a festive town wrapped in "a clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring" (2016: 329), populated by "mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched" and "not naïve and happy children– though their children were, in fact, happy." (2016: 331). More than that, like those at Chautauqua, the people of Omelas "did without monarchy and slavery" and "also got on without the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb. […] Religion yes, clergy no." (2016: 330-331). These resemblances are perhaps not entirely random. After all, an epigraph to the short story reads "(Variations on a theme by William James)" (2016: 329). Interestingly, however, the idea for the story does not seem to come from James's "What Makes Life Significant?". Rather, Le Guin (2015: 254) herself has said that while the central idea for it came from Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, it was her reading of a particular paragraph of James's "The Moral Philosopher and The Moral Life" (1956) that produced for her a "shock of recognition". And indeed, what is especially noteworthy about the resonances between these two stories is not their similarities but a key difference– one that dramatises James' rejection of any transcendence capable of overcoming the pluralistic problematic, his rejection of any temptation to turn the generative problem of pluralism into a merely imperfect and regrettable fact of politics, or indeed, of metaphysics.

Le Guin's Omelas is haunted by an open secret whose disclosure to the reader, the narrator wagers, may help coat the description of this otherwise implausibly utopian city with an added halo of verisimilitude. This open secret is the existence, in "a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings", or "perhaps in the cellar of on a its spacious private homes", of a room the size of a broom closet, with dirty floors, "one locked door, and no window", containing a rusty bucket and couple of mops with "stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads" (Le Guin, 2016: 333). But this was not just any broom closet. For inside it there is a child who "looks about six, but is actually nearly ten. Perhaps it was

born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its tows or genitals, as it sits hunched in the corner farthest from the bucket and the two mops." (Le Guin, 2016: 333) The confined existence of this child is an open secret because "[t]hey all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there." (Le Guin, 2016: 334). Furthermore, its being there is not just a *fact*, a contingent imperfection that could easily be corrected. Rather, the people of Omelas "all know it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery." (Le Guin, 2016: 334).

This is why the children of Omelas are not *naïvely* happy, although they are, in fact, happy. After visiting the child, "often the young people go home in tears", but their "tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it." (Le Guin, 2016: 335). That is the case at least for those who, upon their visit do, in fact, return home. But that's not the end of Le Guin's story. There is "one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible." That is the fact that, occasionally, "one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. These people go out into the street and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates." (Le Guin, 2016: 336) We do not know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.

While initially charmed by the atmosphere of success of Chautauqua, James too walks away from it. And to his "own astonishment, on emerging into the dark and wicked world again", James (1907: 270) finds himself "quite unexpectedly and involuntarily saying: 'Ouf! what a relief!". But unlike the ones who walk away from Omelas, James had experienced no such bitter injustices, no

locked-up child, and his walking away represented no resolution of any moral dilemma. Instead, what makes him unexpectedly sigh with relief was precisely the thorough *absence* of "the heights and depths, the precipices and the steep ideals, the gleams of the awful and the infinite" (1907: 271). It was, in other words, the "atrocious harmlessness of all things", the completely *unproblematic* communion of a community "so refined that ice-cream soda-water is the utmost offering it can make to the brute animal in man", that he could not abide with. For it effectively turned Chautauqua from the final synthesis of a civilisational dialectic, a veritably realised Utopia, into an irremediable flatness where not even a "sign of any previous battle remained" (1907: 272).

Thus, once back "in the big outside worldly wilderness" of a world that was nevertheless growing too tame and forcefully unified itself, James proposed that what makes life significant is nothing other than that "element of precipitousness, so to call it, of strength and strenuousness, intensity and danger" (1907: 271). Affirming this element of precipitousness does require, after all, coming to terms with the fact "that life is hard", and that, given our "planetary conditions", there "is nothing to make one indignant" of that fact (James, 1982: 171). But as far as James is concerned, this acceptance of the world's dangers breeds neither resentment nor the kind of *amor fati* that revels in a sense of inescapable suffering: that was anathema to his philosophical temperament. To affirm the element of precipitousness is not to accept injustices as necessary to "the terrible justice of reality". This is a dangerous planet indeed, but what is "capable of arousing indignation", James writes, is the fact that so many people, "by mere accidents of birth and opportunity, should have a life of *nothing else* but toil and pain and hardness and inferiority imposed upon them" (James, 1982: 171). How to characterise this element of precipitousness, then, without sanctioning – let alone celebrating– the suffering of those who are conscripted into a life of *nothing* but suffering? How, in other words, to respond to the thoroughly problematic nature of the pluriverse in a way that can also constitute a pluralistic, speculative wager, in a way that can animate and sustain divergent struggles against various forms of injustice without conflating those struggles with the modern dream of a perpetually peaceful world?

In a way that seems to follow the very rhythm of the problem he was taken by, James develops his essay errantly, by seeking for models of precipitousness in actual forms of social and cultural life. Impressed by the sight of frantic urban and industrial development as he was on a speeding train toward Buffalo, he first entertains the notion that it is neither the middle-class paradise of the "Great Community" of Chautauqua, nor the generals and the poets, that should be lauded for the realisation of the ideals of civilisation, but rather "to the Italian and Hungarian laborers in the Subway […] ought the monuments of gratitude and reverence of a city like Boston to be reared." (James 1907: 276). And yet, after a long excursus exploring Leo Tolstoy's own ode to working-class life, James cannot quite remain content with it. For any such romanticism, he states, "makes [Tolstoy's] love of the peasant so exclusive, and hardens his heart toward the educated man as absolutely as he does." (1907:283) And so he moves to a rather more abstract model, that of people, of any walk of life, who espouse and live by novel ideals; but also quickly finds that, by themselves, "mere ideals are the cheapest things in life." (1907: 292) He can't quite seem to settle on any single model.[iii] As he acknowledges with some trepidation while approaching the conclusion of his essay:

> I seem to be just taking things up and dropping them again. First I took up Chautauqua, and dropped that; then Tolstoï and the heroism of common toil, and dropped them; finally, I took up ideals, and seem to be now almost dropping those. But please observe in what sense it is that I drop them. It is when they pretend *singly* to redeem life from insignificance. Culture and refinement all alone are not enough to do so. Ideal aspirations are not enough, when uncombined with pluck and will. But neither are pluck and will, dogged endurance and insensibility to danger enough, when taken all alone. There must be some sort of fusion, some chemical combination among these principles, for a life objectively and thoroughly significant to result. (James, 1907: 296)

In other words, James keeps taking up and dropping models because, if the significance of life lies in its precipitousness, in that thoroughly problematic nature that makes life a *strange blending* of aim, intensity, endurance, accident, and drift, one cannot ask "for *whom*? in *whose* life*?"*– for that *chemical combination* is not be found in any *single* form of individual life, but in difference itself. And this does not just simply refer to the difference *between* human individuals or groups, for "[e]very *it* carries in itself an infinite number of *differences* from an infinite number of other its." (James, 1988: 124). As such, the combination is indeed *chemical,* involving the interrelated functions, organs and cells that make up a body, and even the connected bits of mind-stuff that compound a consciousness (see James, 1996b). It's difference all the way down. And if, as James (1890: 245-246) argued, "we ought to say a feeling of *and,* a feeling of *if,* a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by,* quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* and *cold*", it is both because these are feelings of *difference,* just as real as the feelings of things and their qualities, and because without the precipitousness of difference there would hardly be any feeling at all. For "[a]ll feeling whatever", he sustained elsewhere,

> seems to depend for its physical condition not on simple discharge of nerve currents, but on their discharge under arrest, impediment, or resistance. Just as we feel no particular pleasure when we breathe freely, but a very intense feeling of distress when the respiratory motions are prevented, – so any unobstructed tendency to action discharges itself without the production of much cogitative accompaniment, and any perfectly fluent course of thought awakens but little feeling; but when the movement is inhibited, or when the thought meets with difficulties, we experience distress. It is only when the distress is upon us that we can be said to strive, to crave, or to aspire. (James 1956: 64)

Indeed, it might be that, in asking the question "what makes life significant?", James was perhaps gravitating towards what, many years later, Deleuze (2001) was to call "*a* life", as distinguished from any individual life: an impersonal yet singular plane of immanence, on which everything leans while *it* leans on nothing. And as his own thoroughly immanent notion of "pure experience" took definite shape along the development of his *radical empiricism*, James emphasised that what makes an empiricism *radical* is precisely its imperative to do "full justice" to the reality of both conjunctive and disjunctive relations, to feelings of *and* and *but* and *if*, continuities and discontinuities, actuality and potentiality, divergence and togetherness (James, 2003: 23). What is at stake in the feeling of difference, then, is nothing other than the significance of *a* life. And doing "full justice" to the feeling of difference, to the reality of relations, requires that we come to terms with the fact that just as a problem, from the point of view of psychology, forces thought to swim in a fringe of felt relations, for James *the pluralistic problematic is part and parcel of the fabric of reality*, lurking precipitously in the interstices of every individual, generatively precipitating the ongoing and unfinished plurality of divergent forms of life.

Pluralism: Or, The Pragmatics of the Pluriverse

The ongoing generation of divergently plural forms of life is not something to be *overcome*, but something to be honoured, cultivated, and enlarged. Indeed, this is perhaps why the problem of the one and the many is "*so pregnant*". Not just because it is a classic metaphysical problem, because it tells us about someone's outlook on things, or because it would force one to choose sides in absolute terms, to be either a *decided* monist or a *decided* pluralist. The problem of the one and the many is generative because, were one to side with the One, as monism does, one would have to reject the felt reality of *difference*; in rejecting the reality of difference, one has to renounce the element of precipitousness that gives life it's expressive and dramatic character; and in renouncing that, one

denies life any significance. As James noted, however, something similar happens if one sides with the Many in an absolute sense, for indeed divergence presupposes togetherness, and vice versa: a world that is *absolutely* many and never, in some sense, one, is not "a world" at all, not least because one of the ways in which the world is *relatively* one is by virtue of the possibility of it being named *as* one ("the world") (see James, 1975: 66; 1996a: 125). But the "relativity" of discursive oneness matters– it is not relativism, which undermines the meaning of truth, but a relativity that affirms the reality of relations. And so discursive oneness should be taken with a pinch of salt, for "'chaos', once so named, has as much unit of discourse as a cosmos".

It is not that James was averse to the taking of sides on any matter whatsoever. Quite the opposite, in fact: in his essay "The Will to Believe" (1956), he argued for the importance of what he called "genuine options", by which he meant problems whose possible responses, or "hypotheses", were of a living, momentous, and forced, kind. That is, problems whose insistence is such that the alternative responses they generate touch upon something of direct importance; that create a unique opportunity whose effectuation is irreversible and of consequence; and problems whose nature is such that a response *must* be given, where "there is not standing place outside of the alternative", and as such prevent anyone confronted with them from being able to *dodge* the problem itself. When I wrote at the beginning of the article that James' response to the problem of the one and the many is precisely to *problematise the choice*, it is not because he is trying to dodge the problem, or to submit it to another theoretical turn of the screw. What he finds instead is that the problem of the one and the many is *so pregnant* because it gives birth to the significance of life. However, when it is presented in abstract and absolute terms, this classical metaphysical problem is neither living ("I should not be astonished if some of you told me it had never vexed you"), momentous (for it has indeed been an "ancient" problem, constantly reversible), nor forced (because, taken abstractly and absolutely, both options lead through different paths down to the same difficulties). In this way, what James endeavours to do as he complicates "the one and the many" is precisely to attempt to rearticulate it as a *genuine* problem. For after all, if the world-picturing activity of metaphysics is to have any

significance at all, which is to say, if it may be capable of making a difference, it cannot begin from a position whose prerequisite would be to deny that felt, chemical combination which makes life significant.

Thus, James (1996a: 125. emphasis added) responds to this problem by confronting it with the pragmatic question, one that turns the problem "upside down": "Suppose there is a oneness in things, what may it be known-as? *What differences* to you and me will it make?" Put in this way, the choice is no longer between "the one" *or* "the many" taken absolutely, but rather between the "the one-*or*-the many", taken as an absolute disjunction, and "the one-*and*-the many" as a disjunctive conjunction. In other words, between an option that, insofar as it rejects their divergent togetherness of the one and the many as a matter of principle, dodges the feeling of difference and therefore can make *no difference*; and another which takes difference, the problematic togetherness of "the one and the many", as a felt reality to be honoured, cultivated, and enlarged.

In so doing, pragmatism, with its "criterion of the practical differences that theories make, […] must equally abjure absolute monism and absolute pluralism." (James, 1975: 74). Approaching the problem pragmatically rather than abstractly, James (1975: 66-67) recognises that there are multiple ways in which the existence of *some* oneness in things does make a difference– as mentioned above, there is some *discursive* or abstract oneness that allows us to hold "the universe" so that, in name at least, nothing be left out; there is also some *continuous* oneness, in the sense that we can pass from one place to another without falling off the universe; there are also practical forms of oneness that establish such continuities, like "lines of influence"– gravity or heat-conduction, for instance– as well as "generic unity", in that we can –however imperfectly– class things into kinds. Importantly, *some* oneness in things is expressed, for better and ill, by "networks of acquaintanceship" among people, forged as human efforts and "colonial, postal, consular, commercial systems" unify parts of the world and "propagate themselves within the system but not to facts outside of it."

There are, therefore, *some* degrees of oneness, however minute or grandiose– partial ways (call them western modernity, global capitalism, colonialism, ecological catastrophe, and a thousand

other names) in which we may all be in the same in the same boat, to swim or sink together. There is no Planet B, as activists rightly say. To be in the same boat does not mean, however, that we're all in it in the same way. Many of us, moderns and other-than-moderns, humans and other-than-humans, living and dead, are already, as others have been, or may end up soon, piled in the belly of the ship. But make no mistake, such forms of togetherness are made of nothing but divergence. We are together just as "things are with other things in many ways but nothing includes everything or dominates over everything." For after all, "[t]he word 'and' trails along every sentence" (James 1996b: 321), and the world is neither oneness through-and-through, nor manyness through-and-through, but a problematic multiplicity– a *pluriverse* "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 cannot unify them completely in our minds" (James 1975: 71).

Thus, the introduction of the pragmatic question does not, despite appearances –and more, despite its philosophical and political trajectory after James– propose some sort of "third way" that would allow monists and pluralists to "tolerate" each other a little more. The pluriverse may be a world of many worlds, but it is not one where one day everything would finally "fit" (cf. Reiter, 2018). Just as James grants that *some* forms of oneness in things do exist, he also shows that for each one of these ways in which the world discloses itself as one, something always escapes: chaos cannot be contained in its discursive oneness, paths of continuity are constantly broken by interruptions and blockades, generic unities are imperfect, networks of acquaintanceship and power do not, often despite their best efforts, dominate *every single fact.* "'Ever not quite'", James (1996b: 321) wrote, "has to be said of the best attempts anywhere in the universe at attaining all inclusiveness."

It is the fact that there is always *some* difference that makes *all* the difference, transfiguring the entire problem. Because, by abjuring both oneness and manyness *absolutely*, the apparent symmetrical opposition between monism and pluralism breaks down. The reason for this is that, if it is to abide by its own demands of coherence, monism must affirm that *all* is one, and thus can admit *no* differences whatsoever. This, in fact, was one of James' criticisms of Hegel and the German

Idealist tradition more generally, the reason why he accused them of mingling "mountain-loads of corruption with its scanty merits" (Jame 1956: 263). That is, that their monistic appeal to the idea of the "absolute" allows them to sanction and justify *anything* and *everything* –the most exciting moments and the worst forms of suffering– after the fact, rendering all concrete differences insignificant in the face of the realisation of the universe's perfection (James 1975: 290). Indeed, it might be said that for a true monist the very problem of the one and the many is dead in the water from the very outset, for "the slightest suspicion of pluralism, the minutest wiggle of independence of any one of [the world's] parts from the control of the totality, would ruin it" (James 1975: 78). By contrast, pluralism "has no need for this dogmatic rigoristic temper" (James 1975: 78). Indeed, a pluralist needs not suppose from the outset any specific degree of difference, or any specific distribution of oneness, but must only resist the monistic dogmatism that there be *no* difference. Because it takes the problematic togetherness of the one and the many as a felt reality, pluralism affirms that there is *some* difference: that differences are part and parcel of the world. As James put it in *A Pluralistic Universe,* its speculative wager is that reality exists in the "each-form" rather than the "all-form", a "strung-along and flowing sort of reality which we finite beings swim in." (James 1996b: 213). Pluralism, in other words, is a name for staying with the feeling of *and,* of *but* and *if* and *with;* for staying with the one *and* the many, with *the pluralistic problematic.*

I insist: for *staying* with it, not for *overcoming* it. First, because a philosophical solution of the classical metaphysical kind, one that by way of a series of general principles could capture, as in a single mental fist, the totality of the universe "so that no one's business is left out, so that one one lies outside the door saying 'Where do *I* come in?' is sure in advance to fail. […] That sphinx-like presence, with its breasts and claws, that first bald multifariousness, is too discrepant an object for philosophic contemplation" (James 1996b: 32-33). And second, because a *political* "solution" would, at best, bring us back to Chautauqua, and at worst, to imperialism, dissolving in both cases the chemical combination by which difference redeems life from insignificance. If pluralism stays with the pluralistic problematic, it is precisely because the latter generatively impregnates the world with

differences, relations, novelties and potentialities that make the pluriverse think, dream, fear, and aspire. In other words, because they make it go on, creating an after to every ending.

And if pragmatism, asking after the differences that problems impregnate the world with, "must obviously range herself upon the pluralistic side" (James, 1975: 79), we may conversely say that pluralism, as a temperament that takes the pluralistic problematic as a felt reality, must first and foremost be a *pragmatics of the pluriverse*: speculatively experimenting with problems not in order to find their "true" solution, but to enable them to enable us to impregnate the world with new differences. After all, staying with the pluralistic problematic implies that, rather than being concerned with providing the correct answer to the riddle of the sphinx, pragmatism becomes an empirical philosophy, a tool for the noticing of neglected differences, and the precipitating of novel forms of divergence. Possible differences that, against the onslaughts that seek to turn the world into a single order and thus strip life from its significance, may contribute to the ongoing process by which the pluriverse's realises itself as true.

Which it to say that the primary aim of a pragmatics of the pluriverse is that of contributing to the pluriverse's *own verification* (Savransky, 2017b). A self-congratulatory process, one might suspect. How can a philosophy get its own verification wrong? In fact, the opposite is the case. It is a thoroughly risky task. First, because without being able justify its difference by appealing to some transcendental principle, it strips itself form any philosophical authority. And second, because as it is bound to respond to the imperative of the pluralistic problematic, a pragmatics of the pluriverse prevents us from thinking of ourselves as the only true actors, capable of making and unmaking worlds with words. The pragmatics of the pluriverse, by contrast, must itself operate as a singular, generative vector of precipitousness in what will nevertheless remain a wider, disparate, dangerous and multifarious pluriverse. It holds out a trusting hand to a world which it trusts may meet its hand, but holds it out at its own risk, without guarantees. For unlike Chautauqua, the pluriverse is an "additive world" (James 1996a: 205), fashioned after a different "social analogy, as a pluralism of independent powers". As such, "[i]t will succeed just in proportion as more of these work for its

success. If none work, it will fail. If each does his best, it will not fail. It destiny thus hangs on an *if*, or on a lot of *ifs*– which amounts to saying (in the technical language of logic) that, the world being as yet unfinished, its total character can be expressed only by *hypothetical* and not by *categorical* propositions." (James 1996a: 229).

Unfinished Pictures: Or, The Feeling of *If*

If philosophies do paint pictures, the picture painted by James' pluralistic philosophy is a dramatic one: of a pluriverse permanently in the making, ongoing and unfinished, in a recurring struggle that effectively forces it to keep boiling over itself, always in the precipitous process of becoming a little smaller and a little larger than an entire universe. In other words, *a problematic universe.* At the same time, though, philosophies are also intimate parts of the universe, and the painting in the making is itself part of the ongoing drama, impregnated by the problems its picture proffers back to it, forcing the process of painting to revolve around them, adding new strokes that cannot not but add, in turn, to the boiling over of the universe the strokes are seeking to paint. As a world-picturing activity, philosophy cannot but add to the world's ongoing pluralisation. *Some problems of philosophy*, indeed. Surely that is what James meant when, somewhere in that manuscript that would finally consecrate him as a systematic philosopher, he wrote that the main difference between a pragmatist and an "anti-pragmatist" is that, while the latter postulates a pre-existent and absolute truth that our ideas must imitate, "the pragmatist postulates a 'reality' for our ideas to be become true of." (James, 1988: 237).

Only scattered and loosely connected notes remain of that permanently unfinished masterpiece that was to be titled *The Many and The One*, as added strokes to a picture that would at all costs refuse to be contained in its canvas, as tentative responses to a problematic that refused to be solved. As if the introductory notes of the manuscript presaged something of its own fate, in them

James (1988: 5) wrote that the "facts of struggle seem too deeply characteristic of the whole frame of things for me not to suspect that hindrance & experiment go all the way through." It seems he was right. One can only speculate what philosophy might have become, had James completed the text. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how one could even express the picture of such a pluriverse except by approximation, by hypothetical propositions, by feelings of *if*, experimenting to awaken sympathetic responses to the trusting hand, by a plurality of other hands in the making. But perhaps for that reason, paradoxically, we can be grateful that the philosophical system remained unfinished. The experiment, like the pluralistic problematic it responds to, still goes on, all the way through. What might this pluriverse become capable of?

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[i] An exception to the narrowness of such grooves is no doubt expressed in the work of a political theorist William Connolly (e.g. 2005, 2011), who in his distinctively creative pluralism has been amongst the very few to keep alive the generative interplay between politics, metaphysics and experience that is involved in James' pluralistic philosophy.

[ii] For a more in-depth discussion of Dewey's struggles with the politics of pluralism see the following essay by Avigail Eisenberg (2017).

[iii] What's more, as Alexander Livingston (2016) has recently shown, the theme of "the strenuous life" was also one which Theodore Roosevelt –who had been James' student in a class on comparative anatomy– deployed in an important speech to mobilise Americans in defence of American imperialism. And yet James not only published a scathing critique of the speech, accusing Roosevelt of immaturity and bellicosity. He also found it important in his own essay to point out that it

was composed “before the Cuban and Philippine wars”, so as to clarify that such “outbursts of the passion of mastery are, however, only episodes in a social process which in the long run seems everywhere tending toward the Chautauquan ideals.” (James 1907: 274)