



## European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy

III-1 | 2011

Contemporary Reassessment of William James a  
Century Later

---

### Individuality

The Emersonian Background of the Bergson-James Controversy

Anna M. Nieddu

---



#### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/868>

DOI: 10.4000/ejpap.868

ISSN: 2036-4091

#### Publisher

Associazione Pragma

#### Electronic reference

Anna M. Nieddu, « Individuality », *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* [Online], III-1 | 2011, Online since 01 July 2011, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/868> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejpap.868

---

This text was automatically generated on 30 April 2019.



Author retains copyright and grants the *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

---

# Individuality

## The Emersonian Background of the Bergson-James Controversy

Anna M. Nieddu

---

- 1 The peculiarity of the relation between William James and Henri Bergson is connected to the deep differences of their philosophical outcomes. Really, it looks unusual that the two philosophers – both started from an idea of temporality of conscience so similar to be practically interchangeable – reach a conclusion at last, in many respects, diametrically opposite.<sup>1</sup>
- 2 Also the history of the relationship James-Bergson, as it can be reconstructed through letters and testimonies of various kinds, appears confused and uneven.
- 3 In a letter to Th. Ribot dated July 10th 1905, Bergson refers to an article appeared in the *Revue Philosophique*; in this article, Gaston Rageot affirmed that in his composition of the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, the French philosopher would have been influenced by the psychologies of James Ward and William James: France would have borrowed a *psychology* from United States to give back a *philosophy*.<sup>2</sup>
- 4 Bergson defends the *full* originality of his position affirming not to have had knowledge of J. Ward's *Naturalism and Agnosticism* to the time when he was engaged to compose the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* and only to have read the item written by Ward on the *British Encyclopedia*. With the same resolution, Bergson affirms not to have known of the same epoch in the article published in 1884 on *Mind* by W. James.<sup>3</sup> But, really, this article also, broadly used by W. James for the drawing up of the IX chapter of *The Principles of Psychology*,<sup>4</sup> bears witness to the fact that W. James had elaborated the basis of his psychological theory well before (i.e. five years before) Bergson had published his *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*. On the contrary, Bergson writes to Ribot that James truly was “*un philosophe dont je ne dirai jamais assez combien je l'aime et je l'admire,*” but unequivocal chronological reasons would forbid us to think about the possibility that the idea of *stream of consciousness* could have represented somehow a model for the *durée réelle*.
- 5 According to Bergson, undeniably some analogies among the two ideas concerning the dynamics of consciousness exist and they are evident; nevertheless – writes the French

philosopher – we can see that they: “*n’ont pas la même signification et ne peuvent se rattacher à la même origine.*”<sup>5</sup> The *stream of consciousness* has a *psychological* origin; the *durée réelle*, instead, draws its origin in the criticism of homogeneous time, as expressed in mathematics.<sup>6</sup> It exists among the two philosophies – Bergson will still say – a sort of “*preestablished harmony*,” but not an identity,<sup>7</sup> and the different origins of the notions of *stream of consciousness* and *durée réelle* give reason for their different functions too. As we have seen, for the French philosopher the true reason that really fits to expound certain analogies is to be sought in the general climate of an epoch, tense to the realization of a model of philosophical thought more concretely “*tied to life.*”<sup>8</sup> A few days later his answer to Ribot, Bergson wrote a letter to James in which he supports that the fact that pragmatism and spiritualism appear so close in their criticism to the concept of spatial time denotes that the two philosophies are: “*l’une et l’autre dans le voisinage de la vérité.*”<sup>9</sup> According to the French philosopher, Jamesian pluralism and Bergsonian spiritualism represent two answers different but complementary to the same demand; that is to say, the two answers both represent the need to transfer the metaphysics on a plan of vital concreteness after having shown the modalities by which the *inner experiencing* of human beings happens.

- 6 So, it could appear out of place to attest to an *immediate* deviation from James’ thought in Bergson’s philosophy – or also a simple *determinable* ancestry – to make affirmations in the opposite sense. Nevertheless, the representation of the life of human consciousness in the form of a “*stream*” and the qualification of inner time as “*durée*” appear tightly interconnected and, finally, both are finalized to the determination of a *new and concrete metaphysics*, in comparison to every kind of ontological hypostatization.<sup>10</sup>
- 7 In the relationship between Bergson and James an articulated and rich literature exists, contemporary to the two philosophers and following<sup>11</sup> that has the worth to point out the ‘*unusual coincidence*’ to which we reported up until this point. It will not be assumed, in this occasion, the assignment to add new remarks inside this explored debate; the differences between the origins and the subsequent theoretical developments of the two philosophies, in fact, are evident.
- 8 The present work moves from the belief that the analysis of the relationship among the two philosophers must also follow other runs. The deep-rooted similarity of the ideas of *stream of consciousness* and *durée réelle* – similarity for the contents and not for what may concern their origin and function, as Bergson had sustained – represents, in fact, only a macroscopic aspect of the problem. The idea of a *qualitative* notion of temporality, indeed, opens the doors to a concept of human beings in which the value awarded to the notions of *novelty* and *individuality* plays a decisive role, opening the way to a new form of universalism of values and normative ideals: a *concrete* and *personalistic* universalism.
- 9 *Stream of consciousness*, as well as *durée réelle*, points out the essential feature of human “*nature*” and gives rise to notable developments in the field of ethics, both in respect to inherent problems concerning the formation of the self and in the relationship among its dynamics, both in respect to the theorization of the role of *novelty* exerted by “*great men*” or “*great moral personalities*” in Bergson’s terms.<sup>12</sup> The strong *assonance* between the French philosopher and William James is to be put in a place of prominence also in this case and can be interesting to investigate its origin.
- 10 In this paper, I assume that the topic of *individuality*, and the very similar way in which the two philosophers theorized its *temporalistic* and *pluralistic* constitution, is the field in which it is possible to locate their common referring to Ralph W. Emerson.<sup>13</sup> Both of them

have been deeply influenced by Emerson's thought, even though in different measure and sometimes with different, if not diverging, philosophical results. Nevertheless, just the peculiarity of this common inspiration can contribute to a better understanding of their controversial relation and of the consequences of this relation on the development of James' ethics.<sup>14</sup>

- 11 Also on the basis of the evidences that it is possible to draw from Bergson's statements, his contact with Emerson took roots far away, perhaps at the same time in which William James, on his side, became familiar with the *Transcendentalism* through his father's teaching. In this way, Bergson's admiration of William James appears subsequent and, in a certain measure, *consequential* to that of Emerson:

When I allude to American idealism – Bergson maintains in a discourse held to the Société France-Amerique of New York – I do not mean merely philosophical idealism, although that philosophical idealism is what drew me towards America many years ago, when I was almost a boy; *I loved Emerson*, and later I became a devoted friend and admirer of one of your greatest minds, one of the greatest philosophers of his time and probably of all times, William James.<sup>15</sup>

- 12 In 1936, in a letter addressed to J. Chevalier, Bergson still writes that it is well-suited to James Emerson's definition of personality: "*une réserve de force qui agit par sa seule présence.*"<sup>16</sup> Few years before, indeed – giving in *Les Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion* his own definition of "great moral personality"<sup>17</sup> – Bergson had shown he remembered the lesson of an attention given to the *individual* and the *new* coming not so much from the European romantic tradition, but rather from the American philosophy of the preceding century.<sup>18</sup> Also Bergson's positions seem to completely agree with the spirit dominating the young American philosophy. A spirit for which the term *strength* must be understood in a *personalistic* way, that is, like *character*, according to Emerson: a fruitful *human* energy that qualifies the single contexts in which it is inserted, *identifying* them.<sup>19</sup>

- 13 This appears to be also the case of some expressions that James had devoted to the figure of Emerson:

Emerson's belief that the individual must in reason be adequate to the vocation for which the Spirit of the world has called him into being, is the source of those sublime pages, hearteners, and sustainers of our youth, in which he urges his hearers to be incorruptibly true to their own private conscience. Nothing can harm the man who rests in his appointed place and character. Such a man is invulnerable; he balances the universe, balances it as much by keeping small when he is small, by being great and spreading when he is great. [...] The vanity of all superserviceableness and pretence was never more happily set forth than by Emerson in the many passages in which he develops this aspect of his philosophy. Character infallibly proclaims itself.<sup>20</sup>

- 14 The deep trust in the *ethical* value of the inventive actions and capabilities of individuals assumes such a particular meaning in the context of an epoch that – in Europe as well as in America – had assisted and it still assisted in the birth of aberrant productions from a distorted environmentalism, like that proposed by the various currents of *Social Darwinism*. Bergson and James make a common way in their attempt to free the human action from every form of determinism, emancipating the individuals. On the philosophical plane, this ethical aim finds correspondence in the acknowledgement and the statement of the value of *individuality*.
- 15 In Bergson, from the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* to *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, the grounding principle of individuality and the great theme of

freedom develop together and at the same time. *Individuality* and free will, understood like original expressivity of subjectivity, mark the peculiar character of human beings:

L'associationniste – Bergson writes in his essay of 1889 – réduit le moi à un agrégat de faits de conscience, sensations, sentiments et idées. Mais s'il ne voit dans ces divers états rien de plus que ce que leur nom exprime, s'il n'en retient que l'aspect impersonnel, il pourra les juxtaposer indéfiniment sans obtenir autre chose qu'un moi fantôme, l'ombre du moi se projetant dans l'espace. Que si, au contraire, il prend ces états psychologiques avec la coloration particulière qu'ils revêtent chez une personne déterminée et qui leur vient à chacun du reflet de tous les autres, alors point n'est besoin d'associer plusieurs faits de conscience pour reconstituer la personne: elle est tout entière dans un seul d'entre eux, pourvu qu'on sache le choisir. Et la manifestation extérieure de cet état interne sera précisément ce qu'on appelle un acte libre, puisque le moi seul en aura été l'auteur, puisqu'elle exprimera le moi tout entier.<sup>21</sup>

- 16 In Bergson's thought, the authentic freedom is expression of the *whole* personality and, therefore, more difficult to achieve. Owing to a misunderstood and superficial education, in fact, a *parasitical I* overlaps the authentic one, the *I* that Bergson calls *moi fondamental*. Weak suggestions coming from the *I* cannot make their way and remain in a latent state without becoming a motive of conduct.

- 17 In that state, free will cannot be attested:

Beaucoup vivent ainsi et meurent sans avoir connu la vraie liberté. Mais la suggestion deviendrait persuasion si le moi tout entier se l'assimilait [...] toute l'histoire de la personne: et l'éducation la plus autoritaire ne retrancherait rien de notre liberté si elle nous communiquait seulement des idées et des sentiments capables d'imprégner l'âme entière.<sup>22</sup>

- 18 At last, the free action coincides with the re-conquest of self by the subject; a re-conquest that is realized when the subject can reconnect itself to the pure *durée*. In this respect, no one better than the artist is able to achieve a direct contact with the deep passions that animate the human spirit:

Bref, nous sommes libres quand nos actes émanent de notre personnalité entière, quand ils l'expriment, quand ils ont avec elle cette indéfinissable ressemblance qu'on trouve parfois entre l'œuvre et l'artiste.<sup>23</sup>

- 19 The references to the creativeness of the artist enrich of new articulations the relationship between *individuality* and freedom. Sources of freedom, in the well-known Bergson's expressions that we have recalled, might well represent the thread of all the philosophical search of the French thinker. In the *Essai* of 1889, the free act is a spontaneous one since the temporality of experience is *durée*; the free act, in fact, is *one* and indivisible like the temporal continuum which belongs to the life of the conscience. Intellect is incapable to formulate a notion of time that does not denaturalize the sense and the reality of it, making it a pure mental construction.

- 20 Intellect is not able, as well, to define freedom since the free act, as spontaneity, is really indecipherable. The authentic freedom can be only immediately picked up:

Nous pouvons maintenant formuler notre conception de la liberté. On appelle liberté le rapport du moi concret à l'acte qu'il accomplit. Ce rapport est indéfinissable, précisément parce que nous sommes libres. [...] comme on a commencé par figer en quelque sorte l'activité du moi, on voit la spontanéité se résoudre en inertie et la liberté en nécessité.<sup>24</sup>

- 21 The inside development of his views on freedom will conduct the philosopher to a different attitude towards the social implications of human action; the theses of the *Essai*

hide, in fact, a difficulty hard to exceed. The definition of free will as spontaneity and the refined indeterminateness of the affirmations of the philosopher had aroused an immediate critical reaction in whoever – like Levy-Bruhl and G. Belot – saw a real attack to the intellectual capabilities of man in Bergson's idea.<sup>25</sup>

- 22 In *Matière et mémoire*, Bergson already warned the non negligible sense of such criticisms and tried to isolate his own position from the “indeterminist field,” influenced by the psychology of Janet, putting it on the place of a new horizon.<sup>26</sup> Inside this new perspective, it would be possible a reconciliation among the purely sensitive and *animal* element of spontaneity and the reflexive one; the element that better characterizes the human approach to the reality:

Chez l'homme, être pensant, l'acte libre peut s'appeler une synthèse de sentiments et d'idées, et l'évolution qui y conduit une évolution raisonnable. La durée où nous nous regardons agir, et où il est utile que nous nous regardions, est une durée dont les éléments se dissocient et se juxtaposent; mais la durée où nous agissons est une durée où nos états se fondent les uns dans les autres, et c'est là que nous devons faire effort pour nous replacer par la pensée dans le cas exceptionnel et unique où nous spéculons sur la nature intime de l'action, c'est-à-dire dans la théorie de la liberté.<sup>27</sup>

- 23 In this passage, Bergson alludes, even if still vaguely, to the possibility of a third way, among instinct and intelligence; a way that will find expression in *L'évolution créatrice*.<sup>28</sup> In the 1907 work, in fact, Bergson gives evidence of the incapability of the intellect to furnish impulses to the will: the behavior of the human being can be solicited only by suggestions of *emotional* nature. Therefore, liberty appears as an expression of sensitiveness and not of intelligence and for this motive will be difficult to achieve it until human conduct is tied to the habits of the group:

Au contraire, une conduite vraiment nôtre est celle d'une volonté qui ne cherche pas à contrefaire l'intelligence et qui, restant elle-même c'est-à-dire évoluant, aboutit par voie de maturation graduelle à des actes que l'intelligence pourra résoudre indéfiniment en éléments intelligible sans y arriver jamais complètement: l'acte libre est incommensurable avec l'idée, et sa “rationalité” doit se définir par cette incommensurabilité même, qui permet d'y trouver autant d'intelligibilité qu'on voudra. Tel est le caractère de notre évolution intérieure. Et tel est aussi, sans doute, celui de l'évolution de la vie.<sup>29</sup>

- 24 Despite Bergson's *new* theory of free will proceeded toward a definite way, difficulties, criticisms and lacks of understanding of various kinds denote how much the psychology of the *Essai* was considered insufficient and inadequate on the scientific and experimental plan. On more than one occasion during animated discussions in the *Société Française de Philosophie*, G. Belot showed the great weaknesses of the *Essai sur les données de la conscience* to those who appeared to him. Bergson's appeal for the foundation of a method finalized to the establishment of a new metaphysics, according to the author of the *Études de morale positive*, hides a substantial indeterminateness of contents, as well as almost the total absence of experimental results. According to the French moralist, Bergson introduced the analysis of the soul-body relationship in the *Essai* and developed it in following works, but without a real conclusion.<sup>30</sup> Going to the problems more directly connected to human conduct, Belot holds that difficulties considerably increase; a theory that constitutes the individual soul in an entity separated by the body, in fact, leads to an analogous separation of the individuals between them:

Même indécision enfin au point de vue moral. *Tendre à isoler l'esprit du corps, c'est toujours tendre aussi à isoler les esprits les uns des autres*; l'histoire de la pensée morale

confirmerait, ce me semble, cet apparent paradoxe, et en tout cas les doctrines de M. Bergson comportent très manifestement l'aveu de la solidarité de ceux idées.

31

25 To these observations Bergson, simply and quietly, responded:

Que vous dirais-je de plus? Et comment, sur cette philosophie encore vague de la vie, pourrais-je édifier la morale précise et définitive que vous paraissez me demander?<sup>32</sup>

26 In 1932, when Bergson finally sent the book concerning his interpretation of the facts of morals to press, some leading aspects of his thought had also suffered modifications of a certain degree, owing to the influence of a changed cultural climate in social-anthropological studies.<sup>33</sup> In *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, after Bergson took the conscience of the social dimension of individual action, a new concept of community and a different way of handing towards this by the individual came out. The progressive sunset of Positivism made different hypotheses which were related to the social fact practicable and allowed them to refer to the problems regarding the life of collectivity without having to make concessions to mechanistic positions. The pragmatism of James contributes also to the attainment of these finalities and to the foundation of a new cultural climate as well as to a belated return to the psychological functionalism on which this had been founded.

27 In introducing his Hibbert Lecture on Bergson and the criticism of the intellectualism, James in 1909 so expressed himself:

Neither one of Taine's famous principles of explanation of great men, *the race, the environment, or the moment*, no, nor all three together, will explain that peculiar way of looking at things that constitutes his mental individuality. Originality in men dates from nothing previous, other things date from it, rather.<sup>34</sup>

28 It is unusual to see how James attributes *the same* acknowledgement that he steadily addressed to Emerson to Bergson; that is, the worth to have theorized the value of *individuality* and *novelty*, concerned as that inside capability of *every* individual to produce creative actions; the same kind of creative actions that can be identified in the actions of the so-called "great men." According to James, we owe to Bergson the appraisal of the notion of *individuality* as expression of novelty and authentic freedom; that appraisal that the French philosopher – even though in a vague way – assigns to his own *Emersonian source*. Bergson – James still affirms – "cancels the intellectualistic veto" and, making so, produces a self-sufficient philosophical conscience. What intellectualism do, in fact: "is to *harness up* reality in our conceptual systems in order to drive it better."<sup>35</sup>

29 Intellectual processes pursue finalities of practical order; they are not able to justify the triumphalism that science displays in its steady conviction to be able to gather the objectivity of the natural phenomena at all times. James – that does not completely share the Bergsonian 'anti-deterministic' thesis applied to science – limits himself to embank the 'philosophical' pretensions of a certain way to plan the problems:

I am quite willing to part company with Professor Bergson, and to ascribe a primarily theoretical function to our intellect, provided you on your part then agree to discriminate "theoretic" or scientific knowledge from the deeper "speculative" knowledge aspired to by most philosophers, and concede that theoretic knowledge, which is knowledge *about* things, as distinguished from living or sympathetic acquaintance with them, touches only the outer surface of reality.<sup>36</sup>

30 According to James, from a speculative point of view it is valid to assume Bergson's presupposition for which intellect can not gather the reality in its fullness and

concreteness. The discussion related to the theoretical or practical function of the concepts could really be brought to an endless controversy, since – James observes – the way in which the problem is posed is not correct. As a matter of fact, it does not admit the possibility of a *cohabitation* among scientific and philosophical knowledge and between empiricism and philosophy of intuition. We must not confuse different fields of pertinence and different abilities of penetration: “Direct acquaintance and conceptual knowledge are thus complementary of each other; each remedies the other’s defects.”<sup>37</sup>

- 31 However, the deep substratum of the phenomena can be gathered through sudden contacts of sympathetic nature, through the intuition:

The sole thing that is certain in the midst of it all is that Bergson is absolutely right in contending that the whole life of activity and change is inwardly impenetrable to conceptual treatment, and that it opens itself only to sympathetic apprehension at the hands of immediate feelings. All the *what’s* as well as the *that’s* of reality, relational as well as terminal, are in the end contents of immediate concrete perception.<sup>38</sup>

- 32 The point of substantial accord between James and Bergson seems to reside in a conception of the reality in form of a process, such not to allow the intellect to unfold its own logical nature. With propositions and accents that immediately call to the memory Bergson’s *Matière et Mémoire*, the American philosopher confirms the concept of a *becoming* reality, that: “*falls* in passing into conceptual analysis; it *mounts* in living its own undivided life.”<sup>39</sup> So, the assignments of science and philosophy are separate, above all when this last desires to strengthen the aspirations of an *empiricism* that is really such, *integral* and *lived*:

Philosophy should seek this kind of living understanding of the movement of reality, not follow science in vainly patching together fragments of its dead results.

40

- 33 Therefore, James’ aspiration of the last years, tightened to the formulation of a *reliable* notion of truth – that is, a notion capable to guard against the risks implied by an excessive relativism – is set inside an ampler problematic horizon, facing the identification of a specific field of pertinence for the philosophical problems. It seems plausible to recognize in this kind of aspiration the real convergence of concerns among the two philosophers and the fundamental reason for the approach of James to Bergson, an approach sometimes unwitting, or forgetful, of the common referring to a same source.
- 34 The quest of an ideal of truth so constituted inevitably implied the recognition of the *grounding* value of *individuality* and, in a specific way, it sent again to the ethical implications of that same principle. Both the thinkers agree on the presupposition that is creativity the peculiarity of the individual action. This creativity produces ‘truth’ and realizes itself in the immediate contact of the subject with the deepest reality. On the concept of truth it nests one of ambiguities of the thought of the American pragmatist: in the essays that compose his 1909 work, generally, finds expression James’ demand about the foundation of a valid principle of truth; a principle that, at the same time, could be able to respect the pluralist ground of his new metaphysics. This demand – acknowledged, as it is known, also through Renouvier<sup>41</sup> – in the *pluralistic universalism* of James was connected to that tenacious, *consequential*, substratum deriving from the education received by his father in a climate strongly engraved by Emersonian Transcendentalism. Until then, anybody better than Emerson had shown the way to the possibility of a fruitful cohabitation of *monistic* and *pluralistic* instances: nature and



individuals, universalism and free expression of an indefinite and indefinable number of faiths and values.

35 But to gather the roots of that sort of leading ambiguity, it is opportune to remember some pages of *The moral philosopher and the moral life*. In this meaningful essay, appeared in 1891, we assist to the attempt of the philosopher to introduce his own views on the assignments and on the methodologies of the *moral science* in a 'scientific' form. What James wants to examine more precisely is the peculiarity of the relationship of the philosopher with ethical acting. But just on the term action stands a certain ambiguity of the writing.

36 The fundamental aim of the essay immediately comes declared by James:

The main purpose of this paper is to show that there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance. We all help to determine the content of ethical philosophy so far as we contribute to the race's moral life. In other words, there can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics, until the last man has had his experience and said his say.<sup>42</sup>

37 In the analysis of ethical action, physical science and moral science have the common objective to achieve results of generalizable value through the application of a method founded upon the experience. Under this aspect, the methodological plants of physical science and moral science sink the roots into the same substratum, anti-substantialist and anti-absolutist:

On the whole, then, we must conclude that no philosophy of ethics is possible in the old-fashioned absolute sense of the term. Everywhere the ethical philosopher must wait on facts.<sup>43</sup>

38 The moral philosopher works like an arbiter inside the variegated plurality of human faiths and beliefs to propose the more representative ideal in form of a model. Doing this work, the moral philosopher adopts a type of investigation that does not differ, in the method, from that of the natural scientist, but differs from it deeply for which concerns the subject.<sup>44</sup>

39 Feelings and beliefs represent psychological acts, expressions of the intimate nature of the human mind that only the intuitive processes gather in their deeper variety. Exalting a thread of ethical search that unites him to Bergson, James expresses with vigor his own recognition towards intuitionism:

Our ideals have certainly many sources. They are not all explicable as signifying corporeal pleasures to be gained, and pains to be escaped. And for having so constantly perceived this psychological fact, we must applaud the intuitionist school.<sup>45</sup>

40 Ethical actions are not material objects, neither mere representations of the physical datum: they are countersigned for being original creations of the subject. With expressions that seem to anticipate the future developments of Bergson's ethics, and bringing besides the implications of an analysis introduced in 1880, in *Great Men and Their Environment*,<sup>46</sup> he stress the importance of the proposals that arise from great men and from their originality:

Every now and then, however, some one is born with the right to be original, and his revolutionary thought or action may bear prosperous fruit. He may replace old "laws of nature" by better ones; he may, by breaking old moral rules in a certain place, bring in a total condition of things more ideal than would have followed had the rules been kept.<sup>47</sup>

- 41 In the originality, not artfully hunted, and sometimes ‘inevitable,’ resides the possibility to get radical changes of the object of our faith and consequent innovations of the behavior. Although James was both convinced that only in the inner life of the individual the decisive word lodges,<sup>48</sup> he also so that faith makes possible the progress of the humanity toward the best outcomes thanks to the fact that believing in God allows to formulate an unified systematic ethic and that every religious cause frees the individual courage.<sup>49</sup> Whereas logic is incapable to formulate explanations of the action, the mysticism intervenes.
- 42 In that same years, in *The Sentiment of Rationality*, James wrote:
- The peace of rationality may be sought through ecstasy when logic fails. To religious persons of every shade of doctrine moments come when the world, as it is, seems so divinely orderly, and the acceptance of it by the heart so rapturously complete, that intellectual questions vanish; nay, the intellect itself is hushed to sleep. [...] Even the least religious of men must have felt with Walt Whitman, when loafing on the grass on some transparent summer morning, that “swiftly arose and spread round him the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth.”<sup>50</sup>
- 43 The “mystical method,” inspired by the heart, encircles the mystery without being able to penetrate it, James will still write; the not systematic nature of such method represents in fact its substantial weakness:
- if men should agree that the mystical method is a subterfuge without logical pertinency, a plaster but no cure, and that the idea of non-entity can never be exorcised, empiricism will be the ultimate philosophy.<sup>51</sup>
- 44 In this way:
- [...] wonderfulness or mysteriousness will be an essential attribute of the nature of things, and the exhibition and emphasizing of it will continue to be an ingredient in the philosophic industry of the race. Every generation will produce its Job, its Hamlet, its Faust, or its Sartor Resartus.<sup>52</sup>
- 45 The changed accents in comparison to the 1880 essay are clear: the appeal to a mystical method that, according to James, would allow us to reach an authentic and complete empiricism, brings us well over specifically anti-Spencerian assumptions expressed in *Great men and Their Environment*. In this last writing, in fact, the appearance of great men was explained as a spontaneous variation, to the way of the Darwinian theory of evolution; therefore, the assignment of the philosopher was to examine the mutual relationship between the environment and the personalities so constituted. The following developments of Pragmatism, in particular way in Dewey and Mead, can be set in continuity with the evolutionistic theses of the above-mentioned essay and they will often overlook the developments of thought of the last James, of a philosopher that is, more and more ‘infatuated of metaphysics.’
- 46 Really, the position of James is complex, divided and almost working on antithetical or at least hardly compatible plane. Nevertheless, what seems to have surely fascinated James since the years of *The Will to Believe* – but in a more evident way when he composed the *Essays on Radical Empiricism* – was the possibility to mediate truth and pluralism through the appeal to a sort of *principle of individuality*, grounded in the creativeness and the originality of every human being. To the concept of truth as ‘verification,’ he replaces in *The Will to Believe* one new, that does not draw its value only from its practical effectiveness, but keeps the *free will* in the effectiveness of intimate and deep fields of

experience, inaccessible to the scientific knowledge, that can be cultured only through a taking of conscience of fideistic nature.

New men and women, books, accidents, events, inventions, enterprises, burst unceasingly upon the world. It is vain to resolve these into ancient elements, or to say that they belong to ancient kind, so long as no one of them in its full individuality ever was here before or will ever come again. Men of science and philosophy, the moment they forget their theoretic abstractions, live in their biographies as much as any one else, and believe as naively that that fact even now is making, and that they themselves, by doing "original work," help to determine what the future shall become.<sup>53</sup>

- 47 Individuality, both as principle of cosmological order, both in its ethical meaning, constitutes a line of union among two philosophies, pragmatism and spiritualism, so different for methods and finality.
- 48 The philosophies of Bergson and James, departed from that sort of unusual coincidence we referred to, developed two philosophical theories in which, also assuming a different conception of the evolutionary movement, the psychic component and the physic one are harmoniously penetrated. Both the philosophers, after having crossed two distinct and separate walk, reach the formulation of an ethics that is inspired to be one with a common individualistic matrix. For the two thinkers, the ethical principles stop being empty rules and become direct expression of the real life of single personalities.
- 49 The lesson of deep trust in the value of the individual personality acknowledged by Bergson and James has a common 'idealistic' and 'romantic' derivation from Emersonian Transcendentalism. As a matter of fact, if Emerson's thought played an important and well recognized role in the development of American pragmatism, his role over other philosophical European contexts was even more direct and incisive. Is this also the case of Bergson's first approach to American philosophy. Also on this circumstance the adventures of Emerson's seminal ideas carried out a journey *to/from* Europe whose 'rebound effect' on the American context is useful to evaluate.

---

## NOTES

1. Clearly, I refer to William James' concept of "stream of consciousness" (*The Principles of Psychology*, New York, 1890), and Henri Bergson's concept of "durée réelle" (*Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, in *Œuvres*, Édition du Centenaire, Textes annotés par André Robinet, Introduction par Henri Gouhier, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1970, 1-160).
2. Bergson's letter to Th. Ribot is now in: H. Bergson, *Mélanges*, Textes publiés et annotés par André Robinet, Avant-propos par Henri Gouhier, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1972, 656-8.
3. H. Bergson, *Mélanges*: 657.
4. James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York 1890), I: 224 ff.
5. Bergson, *Mélanges*: 657.
6. Bergson, *Mélanges*: 658.

7. Letter to H. M. Kallen, dated October 28th 1915. This letter follows Kallen's publication of the book: *William James and Henri Bergson. A Study in Contrasting Theories of Life*, Chicago 1914. Bergson's letter is now in: *Mélanges*: 1191-4.
8. Bergson, *Mélanges*: 658.
9. Letter to W. James, dated July 20th 1905. *Mélanges*: 659-61.
10. The presuppositions of that turn "toward the concrete," of which in 1932 Jean Wahl will make interpreter, really work in Bergson, since the beginning. J. Wahl, *Vers le concret*, Paris, Vrin, 1932.
11. Apart from the quoted book of H. M. Kallen, on the relation between *stream of consciousness* and *durée réelle* set his attention M. Capek in two interesting articles that opened the way to the following debate. M. Capek, *Stream of consciousness* and *durée réelle*, in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 20 (3), 1950, 331-53; M. Capek, *La signification actuelle de la philosophie de James*, in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 67 (3), 1962, 291-321.
12. H. Bergson, *Œuvres*: 1003-23.
13. I refer to the varieties of Emersonian suggestions that, also in Europe, spread out thanks to an exceptionally fast circulation of all the most important works by Emerson, and of *Representative Men* in particular. This almost immediate circulation is largely owed to the attendant success of Th. Carlyle's works of 1841, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, and to the novelty represented by the disagreement expressed nine years later by Emerson in his *Representative Men*. In this book, the greatness of man is depicted like a potentiality extended to *all* human beings and every 'immediate' theodicy, that foresee some person mysteriously elected by God, is denied. Emerson's thought on this topic restores the possibility of an ethical approach to the problem of the 'greatness of men'; an approach that can be found in Bergson as well as in James. In this paper, cross-references to Emerson's works come from: R. W. Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Centenary Edition, ed. by E. W. Emerson, 12 vols. Houghton Mifflin, Boston and New York, 1903-04.
14. Relatively to this point, it appears today still fundamental the reading of Jean Wahl of the sources and the characters of pluralism in James' thought (J. Wahl, *Les philosophies pluralistes d'Angleterre et d'Amérique*, Paris, 1920; J. Wahl, *The Pluralists Philosophies of England and America*, Oxford, 1925). Also with reference to Wahl's suggestions, K. Ferguson has recently taken back the theme of the pluralism of James as the key of reading of a political vision of James that is often denied or underestimated. K. Ferguson, *Politics in the Pluriverse*, Lanham 2007, 51-72.
15. Bergson, *Mélanges*: 1244.
16. Bergson, *Mélanges*: 1543.
17. *Les Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion* has been published for the first time in 1932. H. Bergson, *Œuvres*: 980-1250.
18. In particular, from Emerson's work of 1850, *Representative Men*.
19. The theme of "character" countersigns the reception of Emerson by Nietzsche too. The problem of the relationship Nietzsche-Emerson has almost crossed one century of the historiographical-philosophical search, considerably modifying some relevant interpretative parameters. An exhaustive outcome of this search is given by the book of an Italian scholar; B. Zavatta, *La sfida del carattere. Nietzsche lettore di Emerson*, Roma, 2004.
20. James, *Essays in Religion and Morality*:109.
21. Bergson, *Œuvres*: 109.
22. Bergson, *Œuvres*: 110.
23. Bergson, *Œuvres*: 113.
24. Bergson, *Œuvres*: 144.
25. Lévy-Bruhl and G. Belot devoted to the essay of Bergson two articles, published in the *Revue Philosophique*, respectively in May 1890 (XXX: 361-392) and in October of the same year (XXX: 361-392). In both the articles, the theory of the liberty proposed by the French philosopher was harshly criticized.

26. Bergson, *Œuvres*: 161-382.
27. Bergson, *Œuvres*: 322.
28. Bergson, *Œuvres*: 578-652.
29. Bergson, *Œuvres*: 535.
30. Discussion of May 2nd 1901 to the *Société Française de Philosophie* concerning “Le parallélisme psycho-physique et la métaphysique positive”; statements of H. Bergson and G. Belot. H. Bergson, *Mélanges*: 463-91.
31. Bergson, *Mélanges*: 470.
32. Bergson, *Mélanges*: 487.
33. In virtue, above all, of the transformations proposed in sociological field by E. Durkheim; a scholar to which Bergson was very tied up. On the value recognized by the French philosopher to the *nouvelle sociologie* is to be seen some Bergsonian texts (1915-33); H. Bergson, *Mélanges*: 1165-170.
34. James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, in *Writings 1902-10*, New York, 1987, 731.
35. James, *Writings 1902-10*: 741.
36. James, *Writings 1902-10*: 742.
37. James, *Writings 1902-10*: 745.
38. James, *Writings 1902-10*: 744, footnote.
39. James, *Writings 1902-10*: 751. In this essay James clearly appears influenced from Bergson’s *Matière et Mémoire*.
40. James, *Writings 1902-10*: 751.
41. It is known that James dedicated to Renouvier *Some Problems of Philosophy*; a work in which there was room for explicit references to the debt of the pragmatist towards the French thinker: “[...] he was one of the greatest philosophic characters, and but for the decisive impression made on me in the seventies by his masterly advocacy of pluralism. I might never have got free from the monistic superstition under which I had grown up,” W. James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, New York, 1968, 165 footnote.
42. James, *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life. An address to the Yale Philosophical Club*, *International Journal of Ethics*, April 1891.
43. James, *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life*.
44. James, *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life*.
45. James, *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life*.
46. James, “Great Men and Their Environment,” in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, New York-London, 1897.
47. James, *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life*.
48. James, *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life*.
49. James, *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life*.
50. James, *The Sentiment of Rationality in The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, New York-London, 1897.
51. James, *The Sentiment of Rationality*.
52. James, *The Sentiment of Rationality*.
53. James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*: 151-2.

---

## ABSTRACTS

Emerson's thought played an important and well recognized role in the development of American pragmatism, but the role exerted by the Transcendentalist in some other philosophical European contexts was even more direct and incisive. On some circumstances, the "adventure" of Emerson's seminal ideas carried out a journey to/from Europe whose "rebound effect" on the American context is useful to evaluate. The widely attested influence of Emerson on Nietzsche sets an expressive example of this outward/inwards journey; other plain indications suggest now to reconsider the Emerson-Bergson relation and the peculiar outcomes that this relation produced in James' pragmatism. In this paper, the controversy between William James and Henri Bergson is considered as from the topic of individuality and the very similar way in which the two philosophers theorized its temporalistic and pluralistic constitution. Both of them have been deeply influenced by Emerson, even though in different measure and sometimes with different – if not diverging – philosophical results. Nevertheless, just their common reference to Emerson can contribute to a better understanding of their controversial relation and of the consequences of this relation on the development of James' ethical views.

## AUTHOR

**ANNA M. NIEDDU**

Universita di Cagliari  
anieddu[at]unica.it