

Discussione

M. Bella, *Ontology after Philosophical Psychology. The Continuity of Consciousness in William James's Philosophy of Mind*

Lexington Books 2019

Claudio Davini

On April 16, 1856, the English naturalist Charles R. Darwin gave his friend Lyell a full report on his ideas. Lyell was still not yet convinced, but strongly urged Darwin to publish his ideas lest he be scooped by someone else. One month later, in May 1856, Darwin began to write his most famous book, *On the Origin of Species*. Two years later, in June 1858, when he had completed the first draft of ten and a half chapters, Darwin received a letter from Wallace accompanied by a manuscript entitled *On the Tendency of Varieties to Depart Indefinitely from the Original Type*. Lyell's words had come true with a vengeance; Wallace's work appeared to be an excellent abstract of Darwin's manuscript sketch. Since there seemed to be no end in sight as far as the Origin's publication was concerned, Lyell urged Darwin to write a short abstract. This abstract was prepared between July 1858 and March 1859, and the volume was published on November 24, 1859, by John Murray. The complete edition of 1250 copies was at once subscribed to by the retail trade. There were no major revisions in the next three editions (1860-1866), quite a few changes in the fifth edition (1869), and still more, including a new chapter, in the last edition (1872).

Despite this incredibly sales success, Darwin's theory was immediately up against many criticisms. In the United States of America, a lot of theologians and scientists – e.g., Louis Agassiz and James Dwight Dana – did not believe it to be a scientifically reliable theory. Nonetheless, the Harvard group known as *The Metaphysical Club* and considered as the founder of the many-sided doctrine of pragmatism was greatly impressed with the far-reaching implications of the Darwinian controversy, because the non-evolutionary character of old-world forms of static empiricism and rigid a priori rationalism had provoked them to sense the intellectual need of a more flexible view of nature and experience. The

writings of Chauncey Wright, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Fiske, Nicholas St. John Green, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. reflect the whirlpool effects of Darwinian evolutionism and its diverse interpretations¹. Bella's *Ontology after Philosophical Psychology. The Continuity of Consciousness in William James's Philosophy of Mind*, published by Lexington Books in 2019, starts precisely from this cultural context of clashing ideas. It consists of four authoritative, well-written chapters that offer a detailed survey of James's thought using the concept of continuity as their focal lens. Bella highlights that «Darwinism is one of the most influences on James's thinking» (p. 3), even though James was not a *Darwinist* like those intellectuals who accepted Darwinism as law – e.g., Thomas Henry Huxley².

Indeed, James always refused the normative interpretations of Darwin's theory, believing that a unique general theory of life could not explain everything. To him, «Darwinism was a descriptive hypothesis which was proving to be scientifically workable, but philosophical and scientific attempts to develop it into a normative hypothesis would have led to a monistic determinism, which was to James an evident misconception» (p. 5). This is exactly one of the most essential aspects of the evolutionary meaning of the method of pragmatism – that the significance of a theory *evolves* with its experimental applications. In studying the effect of Darwin's ideas on James's thought, Bella keeps before her the two aspects of the natural selection theory: that of spontaneous variations and that of the action of environmental conditions selecting those variations having survival value. It was characteristic of James – and of Peirce – to make much of the first, with its indeterministic implications. To put it otherwise, what particularly appealed to James's was the Darwinian principle of fortuitous variations as it served him persistently in his defense of the primary importance of individual experience and personal freedom. According to it, offspring exhibits slight variations from the features that characterize their parents. Let us take the example of James's refusal of Spencer's theory. Spencer argues that the level of mental perfection can be measured by the same definition that he used in his *Principles of Biology* to describe the evolution of living forms: «The continuous adjustment of internal relations to external relations»³. As Bella puts it, «Spencer believes that [...] correspondence would be the sufficient law of mental growth» (p. 6). But Spencer's formula can only describe a mind which is almost entirely shaped by the environment, far closer to animals than to humans. Unlike Spencer, the spontaneity of mind is to James an unavoidable element that goes together with variety, activity, and novelty; that is why James's reflections «find a scientific locus in Darwin's notions of spontaneous variations» (p. 8). After situating James's seminal psychological work in relation to the

¹ Cf. P. P. Wiener, *Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism*, Cambridge 1949.

² Cf. L. Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A History of Ideas in America*, New York 2001, p. 141.

³ H. Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, 3rd edition, London 1896, Vol. 1, p. 203.

influence of Darwin's theory of evolution, the rest of Chapter One (*The Activity of Mind: Experimental Psychology and the Reception of Darwinism*) is a direct and profound reading of some key chapter of James's *Principles of Psychology*; through this overview, Bella reconstructs the indirect state of James's contemporary psychological research, showing why James mounted lucid criticisms of the atomism of sensation and associationist psychology. In fact, Bella – whose aim is to track «James's gradual translation of psychological experimental observations of the continuity of thought into an ontological perspective according to which continuity constitutes a feature of reality» (p. ix) – unpacks different implications of continuity within the 'stream' of consciousness, and most obviously there is the continuity of consciousness in denying the discrete sense impressions of atomistic empiricisms.

While Chapter One examines James's innovative psychology combining historical and theoretical points of view, Chapter Two (*Pluralistic Synecisms*) continues the historical work in studying James's relationship with three prominent interlocutors: Charles S. Peirce, Henri Bergson, and Ernst Mach. As Bella reminds us, they all were «in correspondence with [James] and, most importantly, they shared a common interest in the interactions between psychology, the natural sciences, and philosophy» (p. 59). More precisely, Bella considers their elaborations and critique of the mind-world continuity to provide context for James's theory of continuity, which the subsequent chapter focuses upon. However, given that the secondary bibliography on Peirce, Bergson, and Mach is extremely wide, Bella judiciously limits herself to brief and precise considerations of a limited number of texts, mainly focusing on those texts that seem to be quite interesting in the light of James's psychology and in view of his later work. In Chapter Two, Bella efficaciously modulates the exegesis of James's interlocutors' work with the survey of their similarities and differences with James's reflections. In relation to Peirce's thought, Bella investigates into his complex logic of continuity, also complicating common reductive caricatures of the James/Peirce relation and accurately showing their philosophical differences. Particularly interesting is Bella's reference to the anonymous review of James's *The Principles of Psychology* which Peirce almost certainly wrote in 1891 for *The Nation* and where he «sympathizes with the work of demystification which James carries out, [being nonetheless] very severely critical with the logic of his colleague's arguments» (p. 74). Peirce firmly rejects James's methodological suspicion of every form of idealism because he does not agree that metaphysical considerations throw no light upon scientific questions – and this is the typical feature that distinguishes Peirce's thought as a whole. Then, Bella details Bergson's works published during James's lifetime, analysing them so as to discover possible continuities and discontinuities with James's thinking. The reader has to give Bella credit on showing how the two are oriented around different problems, despite their mutual stated affinities; indeed, while James starts from psychology, Bergson is really more interested in metaphysics. This appears to be «the reason why James seems to have stumbled in the direction of

the mind-world continuity, whereas Bergson was looking for it from the very beginning» (p. 100). As we have noticed, the interests of James and Bergson were far apart. In this respect, James and Mach share a more similar background; even if they moved from different fields of inquiry, physiology was indeed an area where their interest easily met. Moreover, like Mach, «James was very interested in the epistemology of psychology and its relationship, as a natural science, with metaphysics» (p. 117). Finally, discussing the relationship between James and Mach, Bella provides a clear, evident link to Einsteinian relativity theory, offering also an interesting overview of the 20th century Philosophy of Science.

As we have seen, Chapter One and Chapter Two examine James's approach to continuity, taking into special consideration the perceptual continuity of consciousness, time, and space, and the most important critiques and suggestions that James received from Peirce, Bergson, and Mach. In Chapter Three (*James's Ontology of Continuity*), Bella changes perspective and focuses upon James's reflection on continuity from both the metaphysical and the epistemological point of view. Against Lamberth's interpretation of James's epistemology as metaphysically underpinned⁴, Bella prefers «to stress the epistemological side of James's intertwined view of epistemology and metaphysics in his psychological texts» (p. 124), noting the impossibility of tracing neat limits between epistemology and metaphysics. More precisely, the reason for this choice is Bella's conviction that James's concept of continuity is more related to a psycho-physiological-epistemological-ontological view than to a pan-psychic metaphysical claim. Throughout the chapter, Bella follows James's well-known polarity of empiricism versus rationalism in an original, intriguing way. Indeed, she chases it in terms of psychological temperament, methodological habits and in terms of the relations between life and theory – and this is a fundamental issue, as Bella remarks asking herself what follows: is thought for the sake of life, or is life for the sake of thought? In this regard, two evident tensions immediately emerge. Firstly, as Bella writes, «our intellectual life should be considered as a systematic substitution of the perceptual order of experience with abstract orders of concepts» (p. 132). But while perceptual experience exhibits continuity, thought does not – being made of discrete concepts. Bella skillfully examines James's subtle exploration of this point, showing that «conceptions give extension to our knowledge, [while] perception is the undeniable source of its intensity» (p. 139). Secondly, how is novelty possible in relation to continuity? Doesn't it require kind of a break in the continuity? As Bella puts it, «real novelty involves the problem of the logical continuity of the world, for if something brand new comes into reality out of nothing, its relational continuity is broken and the world would not be ruled by rational laws» (p. 169). Concerning that point, Bella carefully analyses James's solution – a solution leaning on a distinction between collective and distributive notions of reality. In fact, if reality is not collectively

⁴ Cf. D. C. Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience*, New York 1999, p. 199.

closed – meaning that cannot be any universal principle that determines how the continuum grows – «growing continuity and real novelty» (p. 162) are possible.

Both the above-mentioned tensions lead to the sense of continuity developed in Chapter Four (*James's Epistemology of Continuity*). As Bella writes, «[...] no gasps exist in our experience» (p. 211). The intervals are filled with some empirical material, whether ideational or sensational, that performed some bridging purpose – and this means nothing but that the 'path' is continuous, and that stable paths remain open to further change or correction. In fact, we are at the very core of James's situational and contextual pragmatism; certainty is ever not quite and there is a continuous process of correction of truth by experience. Pragmatism is not just a method because it suggests the ontological thesis that reality is not collectively closed but distributively open. This is a conclusion that perfectly fits in with James's Darwinian background that Bella describes in Chapter One. Finally, Bella convincingly argues that continuity is the key concept to follow the bridge between the epistemological and metaphysical in James's thought.

In summary, Bella's book is a much-detailed work offering an engaging, flawless survey of James's philosophy. However, even if it frequently includes a dense and deep exegesis of technical aspects, it cannot be considered a book appealing primarily to specialists. It is Bella's credit to write in a clear and understandable way, even to undergraduates interested in James. In conclusion, Bella's book offers an excellent vision of James's thought, a vision which who seeks insight into the development of his reflections should have to confront.