

Nomadic Methodologies: William James and the Ambulatory Pragmatism of Bruno Latour

Introduction

In an interview with John Bova from 2006, Bruno Latour, distancing himself from the French philosopher Alain Badiou, casually remarks, “I’m the only French pragmatist, so it winds up that I have absolutely no contact with the French.”¹ Latour’s remark is curious insofar as the work performed by the coupling of ‘French pragmatist’ reveals his own dissociation of the French intelligentsia with pragmatism. If Latour is French, he cannot possibly be a pragmatist, but if he is a pragmatist, he cannot possibly be French, so better to refer to himself by this new hybrid: ‘French pragmatist’.

Perhaps it is not so peculiar for Latour to describe himself as the “only French pragmatist,” since references to classical pragmatist figures like William James and John Dewey sporadically surface in works like *Pandora’s Hope* (1999), *Politics of Nature* (2004), and *Reassembling the Social* (2005). But these references are made haphazardly, often without relevant page citations and drawn from a wide variety of texts including James’s *Principles of Psychology* (1890), *Pragmatism* (1907), and *The Meaning of Truth* (1909) as well as Dewey’s *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920) and *The Public and its Problems* (1927).² Though Latour’s citations of James and Dewey are sparse and unsystematic, the significance of James’s account of truth especially comes to the fore in the second chapter of *Pandora’s Hope*, where Latour makes use of James’s distinction between “saltatory” and “ambulatory” relations from *Pragmatism* and *The Meaning of Truth*.³

In light of a turn to ontology within both Latour’s own work⁴ and secondary scholarship on Latour,⁵ contemporary scholars such as Graham Harman and Jane Bennett

¹ Bova, John and Bruno Latour. “John Bova in Conversation with Bruno Latour: On Relativism, Pragmatism and Critical Theory”, in *Naked Punch*, 6 Issue 06 (Spring 2006), 107-121. (p.113)

² See especially Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-network-theory*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. (pp. 111, 162, 163, 261) and Latour, Bruno. *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999. (pp.64, 69-70, 74, 79, 113)

³ See James, William. *Pragmatism, a New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking; The Meaning of Truth, a Sequel to Pragmatism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1978. (pp.247-248)

⁴ See Latour, Bruno. *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2013.

⁵ See Harman, Graham. *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*. Prahran, Vic.: Re.press, 2009 and Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. See also,

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have begun to account for the relation between Latour and pragmatism along ontological lines.⁶ By reading Latour's pragmatism through the lens of his ontology, both Harman and Bennett argue for the ontological kinship of pragmatists like James and Latour through accounts of "object-oriented ontology" and "vibrant materialism" respectively.⁷ While Harman and Bennett provide one possible way to interpret the status of Latour's pragmatism in terms of his ontological commitments, it ultimately proves more fruitful to engage Latour's pragmatism through the lens of what he shares methodologically with a pragmatist like James.

In the following I argue that, regardless of his ontological commitments, Latour is a pragmatist primarily because of his *methodological* concerns. Rather than come to pragmatism through the lens of Latour's ontology, I propose that Latour comes to pragmatism through the lens of his methodology.⁸ Resonant with the methodological pragmatism that James presents in his *Pragmatism* lectures, Latour's methodology concerns itself with the differences produced in a field of action. But unlike James, these differences for Latour are cashed out in terms of *objects* rather than *practices*. Once we recognize this methodological resonance, we can then see how Latour interestingly operationalizes a crucial aspect of the pragmatist method that remains underdeveloped in James concerning the ambulatory quality of method itself. By attending to Latour's reflections on methodological concerns in *Reassembling the Social* and *Pandora's Hope*, I suggest that we redeploy the concept of ambulation that Latour inherits from James to describe the mobility of his methodology. In this respect, Latour's methodological

Latour, Bruno, Graham Harman, and Peter Erdélyi. *The Prince and the Wolf: Latour and Harman at the LSE*. Winchester, UK: ZERO, 2011.

⁶ Ibid. See also Salinas, Francisco J. "Bruno Latour's Pragmatic Realism: An Ontological Inquiry" in *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought*, 20 Dec 2014, 1-14. DOI: 10.1080/23269995.2014.992597.

See Savransky, Martin. "Worlds in the Making: Social Sciences and the Ontopolitics of Knowledge" in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol.15 No.3 (2012), 351-368.

⁷ By drawing the analogy between Bennett and Harman in their readings of Latour in light of the pragmatist tradition, I do not intend to overlook the vital differences between their metaphysical positions, especially concerning the status of materialism in their respective works. For more on this, see Harman's *Prince of Networks* and Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*.

⁸ While the ontological lines of alliances shared by Latour and James on the question of realism and the ontological status of relations may be significant from the point of view of James's radical empiricism, we should heed James's own cautionary remarks concerning the separation of his pragmatism from his radical empiricism. Pragmatism and radical empiricism constitute distinct projects for James such that he can say in his 1907 preface to *Pragmatism* that one can "entirely reject" his radical empiricism and "still be a pragmatist." See James, *Pragmatism* (viii)

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pragmatism is significant because, by slowly and continuously rendering unstable associations traceable, the field of possible action opens beyond the scope of human actors and their practices to include nonhuman actants. To lay out the point of contact between Latour and Jamesian pragmatism along a methodological plane, I turn first to James's account of a 'method only' pragmatism before tracking the ambulatory methodology of Latour. I conclude by specifying the nomadic metaphoric of travel shared by Latour and James in their understandings of methodology.

James's Methodological Pragmatism

In 1904, James published a paper in the *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* under the title of "The Pragmatic Method."⁹ The paper was a slightly revised version of his (in)famous lecture given in 1898 to the Philosophical Union of the University of California where James first publicly lays out the philosophical significance of C.S. Peirce's "principle of pragmatism."¹⁰ The title of James's 1904 article is significant insofar as it highlights James's later description of pragmatism as "a method only" in his celebrated 1906-1907 *Pragmatism* lectures.¹¹ In his second lecture from this series, "What Pragmatism Means," James characterizes the pragmatic method as having the function of "settling metaphysical disputes" by tracing the concrete, practical consequences that follow from holding either view true.¹² As a method only, pragmatism "stands for no particular metaphysical results" because as James notes, metaphysical results are "so many solving names," marking places of rest rather than places of activity and work.¹³

Tracing the etymology of pragmatism to its Greek root *πραγμα*, James follows Peirce in specifying action, conduct, or practice as the constraining methodological foci of pragmatism. James writes, shadowing Peirce, shadowing Alexander Bain, "our beliefs are really rules for action...to develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what

⁹ James, William. "The Pragmatic Method", in *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, Vol.1 No.25 (1904), 673-687.

¹⁰ See James, William. *The Writings of William James; a Comprehensive Edition*. Ed. John J. McDermott. New York: Random House, 1967. (p.348)

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 379

¹² *Ibid.*, 377

¹³ *Ibid.*, 379-380

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conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance.”¹⁴ Difference in action or practice thus serves as the pragmatic test by which pragmatism ‘settles’ metaphysical disputes and determines the meaning of beliefs. By focusing methodologically upon action, pragmatism orients itself away from “*first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities,*” and instead looks toward “*last things, fruits, consequences, facts.*”¹⁵

In describing pragmatism as a method only, James likens the pragmatic method to a corridor in a hotel, which opens out into “innumerable chambers,” wherein different inquirers pursue diverse areas of study such as aesthetics, religion, chemistry and metaphysics.¹⁶ While these inquirers engage in different kinds of work, they all must nevertheless pass through the corridor if they want “a practicable way of getting into or out of their respective rooms.”¹⁷ James’s metaphor is telling insofar as it reveals how pragmatism as a method resides not in any chamber as a stable site of particular study, but resides rather in that space of transit, movement or travel. Methodological pragmatism “has no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method,” because it does not sit still or ‘perch,’ but remains in ‘flight,’ moving and shuttling back and forth in nice, ambulatory fashion.¹⁸ Being in motion itself, it is fitting that methodological pragmatism should orient itself toward action, conduct, or practice.

In his presentation of methodological pragmatism, James importantly reworks the metaphoric of method from one of Cartesian building or construction, whereby one lays the foundations to secure certainty, to one of transition and movement, whereby one experimentally tests the meaning of beliefs through the concrete consequences they bear upon conduct. Applying the distinction James develops in his 1907 essay, “A Word More About Truth,”¹⁹ between the “saltatory” and “ambulatory” relations connecting objects

¹⁴ Ibid., 377

¹⁵ As James is keen to insist upon, this shift in attention brings pragmatism much closer to the empiricist attitude than the rationalist temperament. See especially *Writings*, 379-380.

¹⁶ See Harvey J. Cormier’s insightful essay on James’s corridor metaphor in “Pragmatism, Politics, and the corridor,” from Putnam, Ruth Anna., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to William James*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. (pp.343-362)

¹⁷ Ibid., 380

¹⁸ Ibid. See James’s description of consciousness as resembling the ‘flightings’ and ‘perchings’ of a bird in James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. Vol. 1. New York: Dover Publications, 1950. (p.243)

¹⁹ See James, William “A Word More About Truth,” in *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (p.245)

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with ideas, we might say that in navigating through the field of action which serves as the pragmatic test of our beliefs, James's methodological pragmatism would have us walk rather than leap. For James, the saltatory and ambulatory distinction expresses different relations of knowing, the former connecting objects and ideas discontinuously and abstractly through a "deadly jump" (*salto mortale*), the latter relating objects and ideas continuously and concretely through a "bridge of intermediaries."²⁰ Translating this epistemological distinction to a methodological one in chapter two of his *Pandora's Hope*, Latour uniquely exploits the ambulatory quality of method that remains tacit and underdeveloped in James's account of methodological pragmatism. Thus, in an untimely manner, James's reconstruction of this metaphoric of method anticipates the slow and continuous mode through which Latour's own methodology travels in his field observations of scientific knowledge production.

Latour's Ambulatory Methodology

From a Jamesian perspective, it is curious that Latour should comment, in conversation with Graham Harman, "But pragmatism is not about practice, pragmatism is about *pragmata*, about objects."²¹ According to Latour, the significance of pragmatism consists in its being an "experimentally-based philosophy," but *what* it experiments with, what sets the constraints of its experimentation, are *objects* instead of practices.²² Latour's translation of pragmatism as being experimentally concerned with objects rather than practices is productive insofar as it widens the field of possible action beyond the scope of human practice or conduct to include those nonhuman actants that mediate or transform a field of action. If James's methodological pragmatism focuses its attention upon what concrete consequences follow for *human* conduct from holding a particular belief, Latour's methodological pragmatism attunes itself to the consequences that follow from tracing the concrete differences that objects make for a trajectory of action in certain experimental procedures. Though at first glance it may appear that by honing in on objects, Latour is thereby neglecting action, as we will see, Latour understands objects in terms of action, defined performatively by what they *do*.

²⁰ Ibid., 246-248

²¹ Latour, Harman, Erdélyi, 61.

²² Ibid.

To better elucidate Latour's methodological pragmatism in the context of studying scientific practices, we might consider an example of *how* he puts this method to work in the chapter on "Circulating References" from *Pandora's Hope*. In this chapter, Latour provides an ethnographic account of fieldwork performed by a group of scientists in the Amazon to assess whether the edge of the forest is advancing toward the savannah or vice versa. Latour's presentation of his own ethnographic fieldwork of following a pedologist, geographer, and botanist around as they gather to experimentally determine the status of the relation between the Amazonian savannah and forest consists in a "photo-philosophical montage."²³ Latour narrates a series of freeze-frame images he took while following the scientists around to investigate the status of reference in scientific discourse.²⁴ In developing an account of what he calls 'circulating reference,' Latour reveals ever-so-slowly the labor required in scientific practice for the transportation and translation of "the world into words."²⁵

Circulating reference designates what remains constant in the entire chain of transformations and mediations from matter to form. Unlike the traditional understanding of reference that consists in the ostensive act of pointing to the outside world to verify the truth of a proposition about some state of affairs,²⁶ circulating reference consists in the performative continuity and consistency of an internal series of transformations. To understand how this works, Latour asks us to consider how the pedologists use an instrument called a "pedocomparator" to transmute a clod of complex soil into a stable laboratory-ready sign.²⁷ As a material instrument, the pedocomparator is both a suitcase for transporting clods of soil to a laboratory, as well as a two-dimensional Cartesian grid that keeps the soil in regulated cubes. As the pedologist transfers a clump of soil from the surrounding earth into one of the pedocomparator's cubes, "the earth becomes a sign, takes on a geometrical form, becomes the carrier of a numbered code, and will soon be

²³ *PH*, 24

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 30

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 24

²⁶ See Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 47-49. Latour gives the name of 'inscription' to this process of transmutation whereby an entity "becomes materialized into a sign, an archive, a document, a piece of paper, a trace." See especially his definition of inscription in the glossary provided in *Pandora's Hope*, pp.306-307.

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defined by a color.”²⁸ According to Latour, the pedocomparator makes possible that work of translation whereby the material earth becomes a sign fit for inspection by the pedologist, which later will serve as material for the standardized identification of its color through the intermediary of the Munsell code color index.²⁹ The reference that thus coheres in the continuous chain of transformations from matter to form maintains the circulation of its truth-value so long as the series of mediators is “not interrupted.”³⁰

To support his account of circulating reference and its truth-value, Latour operationalizes the distinction forwarded by James between the “saltatory” and “ambulatory” relations of ideas and objects.³¹ Following James, Latour distances himself from a saltatory account of the relation between world and words in which reference aims to bridge a gap in order to establish correspondence between two otherwise incommensurable matters of concern.³² Latour affirms James’s ambulatory conception of reference which relates world and words, objects and ideas, not through a “deadly jump,” but through the back and forth movement of following a continuous series of mediations or transformations.³³ Here the circulating reference flows inside an indefinitely extended chain of transformations whose elements consist in the uninterrupted sequence of translations involving a minute gap between matter and form. In relating objects and ideas, matter and form, the ambulatory reference “*grows from the middle toward the ends*, which are continually pushed further away,” instead of leaping toward the middle point from two stable extremities.³⁴ Latour understands the saltatory picture under the “Kantian scenography,” whereby phenomena are located “at the *meeting point* between things and the forms of the human mind,” which constitute two stable extremities.³⁵ In contrast to this “Kantian scenography,” Latour’s topography of phenomena is flattened in

²⁸ Ibid., 49

²⁹ Ibid., 59

³⁰ Ibid., 69

³¹ James, *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (p.245)

³² *PH*, 69

³³ Ibid., 70, 74

³⁴ Ibid., 72

³⁵ Ibid., 71 (italics in original)

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such a way that the phenomena continually circulates *in the middle* of an indefinitely elongated, reversible chain of transformations.³⁶

Latour's Jamesian account of circulating reference is significant, not so much for representing "the whole of his metaphysical position" as Harman supposes,³⁷ but for demonstrating the ambulatory quality of his methodology. Ambulation is a feature of Latour's style of methodological orientation just as it is a feature of how he understands reference – hence Latour's constant injunctions in *Reassembling the Social* to "go slow," and "don't jump" in order to render associations traceable again.³⁸ Ambulation ensures the maintenance of continuity in Latour's methodological tracing of associations. For this reason, Latour insists that it is best not to jump. Furthermore, to maintain the uninterrupted quality of fragile associations, Latour cautions to "go slow," lest one's celerity leads to the omission of a vital connection. Latour attentively sustains an unhurried pace in tracking the complex labor required in scientific practices of translating the world into words. The intimacy here between *what* Latour follows as his object of study (i.e., the labor of inscription and translation) and *how* he follows it (i.e., nomadically, through ambulation) resembles the intimacy expressed above in James's account of methodological pragmatism between what constrains the foci of the method (i.e., action or practice) and how the method moves in a constant state of transit (i.e., it remains in the corridor, not in the chambers).

Though Latour insists that pragmatism concerns itself with *objects* rather than with practices, he nevertheless remains proximate to James's methodological pragmatism insofar as he understands objects, or what he calls "matters of concern" in *Reassembling the Social*,³⁹ in terms of *action*, as actants defined performatively by what they *do*.⁴⁰ For example, the pedologist's pedocomparator served as a mediating actant both in transporting the soil to the laboratory site and in translating the material clod of soil into a stable sign. Practices and objects are closely linked here as certain scientific practices depend upon particular objects to do the work of translation in their experimental

³⁶ Ibid. For a "flattened topography," see *Reassembling*, p.174

³⁷ See Harman, 73

³⁸ *RS*, 190

³⁹ See especially his chapter on the "Fourth Source of Uncertainty: Matters of Fact vs. Matters of Concern," from *Reassembling* (pp.87-120).

⁴⁰ See Latour's definition of actant in the glossary of *PH*, (p.303).

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inquiries, and likewise, the particular objects gain import and relevancy in the context of certain scientific practices. By opening up the field of possible action beyond the scope of human practices, Latour methodologically allows for the contribution of nonhuman actants in transforming the trajectory and connectivity of action. He thereby adopts, but also clearly and uniquely enriches, William James's methodological pragmatism.

Conclusion: Methodological Pragmatism and the Metaphoric of Travel

In this paper I have argued for the methodological resonance shared by Bruno Latour and William James in order to understand Latour's affiliation with pragmatism. Unlike contemporary readers of Latour, I have suggested that Latour's relation with Jamesian pragmatism is primarily methodological rather than ontological. This methodological alliance is significant for reworking *what* counts methodologically in terms of *action*, *practices*, and *objects*, and for furthering the underdeveloped theme in James's pragmatism concerning ambulation to specify *how* Latour traces fragile associations. Connected through the concept of action, practices and objects represent the constraining foci of James's and Latour's respective methodologies. By bringing the two together, we see how objects and practices intimately rely on one another in the context of experimental inquiry. Furthermore, we see how the alliance shared by Latour and James consists in a modification of the metaphoric of method in terms of transit or travel.

James's methodological rendering of pragmatism is jointly significant for presenting a philosophical orientation focused on action, practice, or conduct and for reworking the metaphoric of method as one of movement and transit rather than one of building or construction in the Cartesian vein. For James, methodological pragmatism is experimental rather than foundational, suggestive rather than authoritative, agnostic rather than dogmatic, contingent rather than necessary. Like James, Latour also understands method nomadically, as operating primarily under the metaphoric of movement and travel. In the introduction to *Reassembling the Social*, he likens the book to a travel guide, warning that, "If earnest scholars do not find it dignifying to compare an introduction of a science to a travel guide, be they kindly reminded that 'where to travel' and 'what is worth seeing there' is nothing but a way of saying in plain English what is usually said under the pompous Greek name of 'method' or, even worse,

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‘methodology’.⁴¹ Even metaphysics, once taken as specifying the furniture of the universe, is nothing but another tattered Fodor’s guide laying upon a dusty coffee-table: “Because if metaphysics is interesting, *it is* as a method: as travel, as a way of getting at new insights.”⁴² Latour, the “only French pragmatist,” reminds us that if there is anything noteworthy about pragmatism it is that “it allows you to go places. It is a trajectory, a way of doing things.”⁴³ Thus, what is pontifically rendered under the name ‘method,’ including pragmatism as a methodology, is nothing but a set of particular suggestions for how and where to travel – shall we leap or ambulate, sprint or saunter, stay perched in one place or move nomadically, attend to structures or actions, remain in the clean air of theory or enter the tangled mess of everyday affairs? Both James and Latour suggest that we travel via slow ambulation, and, when taken together, recommend that we attend to *action* as the field of *pragma* (practice) and *pragmata* (objects).⁴⁴

⁴¹ *RS*, 17

⁴² Latour in conversation with Harman at LSE (p.59)

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Latour and James are both right in their etymologies of the Greek *prágma* (πράγμα) – the word has a multitude of meanings, which alter depending upon the context in which it is used. It at once means “deed, act,” “occurrence, matter, affair,” “thing, concrete reality,” and in the plural (*pragmata*), “circumstances, affairs.” The noun-form *prágma* is a derivation from the verb *práссо* (πρασσω), “to pass through/over,” “to achieve, effect, accomplish,” “to act,” “to transact, negotiate,” “to practice.” For explanation of these uses see: <http://archimedes.fas.harvard.edu/cgi-bin/dict?name=lsj&lang=el&word=pra%2fssw&filter=CUTF8> For *pragma*: <http://archimedes.fas.harvard.edu/cgi-bin/dict?name=lsj&lang=el&word=pra=gma&filter=CUTF8>