Chapter 2

The Wager of an Unfinished Present: Notes on Speculative Pragmatism

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Introduction: A Speculative Pragmatics of Thought

What might be at stake in thinking and imagining *for* a future that be more than a mere extension of the present? This question, which constitutes the object of exploration of this chapter, demands a moment of pause. What is being asked, and therefore entertained, is neither a general question concerning how the future might be thought ‘about’, nor how to characterise a mode of thought that could finally hold it still, bring it closer, and interrupt its becoming. To pose the question of how one might go about thinking *for* the future already invites a different set of constraints– ones that seek not to dispel, but to inhabit, the living paradox that the becoming of a future –one that could never be reduced to the present– *demands* thought, it forces us to think, yet it is by definition beyond the capture of what thinks it. This paradox makes present that, whenever futures are concerned, what normally binds thought to principles and reasons that may claim to guarantee its success looses its hold, and we are confronted with what different modes of thinking trust in, that is, with the risks they take.

Although speculation is often disqualified as an unfounded and conjectural mode of thinking about futures, all future-oriented forms of thinking involve assumptions and wagers on the nature of the future, and on the efficacy of thinking and knowing in relation to it. Perhaps what makes those practices of anticipation based on probabilistic inferences ‘modern’ is thus their disavowal of their own wagers. A disavowal that seeks to replace the risk of trusting with a discourse that, claiming to be the only heir to ‘reason’, defines and in the process monopolises what counts as reliable ‘evidence’ for making assertions about social, economic, political, and ecological futures. But such practices make their own wagers too– indeed, they wager on a kind of isomorphism between present and future, whereby the present conditions *in which* the calculations are drawn will be conserved in the future *for which* these calculations are drawn (Hacking 1990, Whitehead 1967). Thus, they think for a future that, in relation to what is thought, must be an extension of the present. The question, then, is not whether one makes a wager in thought, but what *kind* of wager one makes. In this chapter, I aim to explore this question by attending to speculation as a specific kind of wager that thought makes upon the future when futures demand to be thought. The latter, I suggest, prompts us to explore questions which concern the role and efficacy of thinking in and for a world that is neither submissive to human reason and mastery, nor entirely indifferent to it. A world that, as William James (1957 [1980]) famously put it, is blooming and buzzing, being shaped and transformed as its many heterogeneous actors practically intervene in it.

Thus, I want to experiment with the possibility that speculation might provide us with a key not into 'the absolute', for which relations, and their consequences, do not matter, but into a certain pragmatics of thought. A pragmatics which is not just or only an attempt to say that thinking is, alas, a practice too, but to suggest that speculation is a singular and specific thinking practice, one whose business is, as Whitehead (1958 [1929]: 82) phrased it, ‘to make thought creative of the future’. If, however, we are to inhabit the living paradox of a future that simultaneously demands thought but never allows itself to be completely captured by it, it is necessary that we pay careful attention to how this ‘creative’ practice might be conceived. I want to propose that, for a speculative pragmatics of thought, to be creative of the future cannot be read in the key of an idealism that would take the powers of thought for granted. Rather, it must be addressed in the manner of an experiment, whose mode of operation depends on the wager it makes, and whose success is never guaranteed. My aim here, then, is to experiment with some of the requirements and possibilities of what might be at stake in developing a mode of thought which proposes itself *to* a future that may be more than a mere extension of our present. In so doing, I will develop a reading of some aspects of the work of two thinkers who learned how to take seriously what connects thinking not to principles and foundations, but to an art of consequences, namely, the earlyAmerican pragmatists John Dewey and William James, in order to elucidate and specify some of the practical dimensions of what might be called a ‘speculative pragmatism’ (for a connection between Whitehead’s ‘speculation’ and and Charles S. Peirce’s concept of ‘abduction’, see Parisi 2012).

Indeed, I will suggest that, despite what the dominant reception of pragmatism in social theory would have us acknowledge, Dewey’s and James’ philosophies of experience, and their discussions of the logic of inquiry, and the role of concepts in experience, respectively, may offer us a productive, experimental understanding of speculation that creates new demands, and new responsibilities, for philosophy and social theory. Conversely, a reading of pragmatism in a speculative key might provide a different understanding of their pragmatic propositions. In so doing, I will contend that speculation can be conceived as a wager on an unfinished present, whose potential is that of cultivating thinking to lure experience –at once natural, social, cultural, political– to take the risk of opening up to its own becoming.

Experience, Science and Thought: A Pragmatist Plea for Speculative Audacity

While pragmatism has recently undergone something of a renaissance which has opened the work of its foundational authors to novel interpretations (e.g. Debaise 2007), to seek to disclose a mode of speculation from the work of the early American pragmatists might still sound to many like a contradiction in terms. Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, pragmatism has been understood as a characteristically anti-speculative philosophy. Were not the pragmatists those who proposed that we should care for (the truth of) ideas only relation to the ‘cash-value’ they report, that is, only in so far as they ‘work’ by ‘helping us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience’? (James 2011[1907]: 33). Were they not the ones who flirted with a certain scientism, depositing a blind faith in the capacities of what they called ‘the scientific method’, to become a vector in the progress of thought (e.g. Dewey 2008 [1929])? Were they not, after all, radical anti-intellectualists who proposed that concepts are, by definition, ultimately inadequate, seeking to discreetly contain a reality that is in fact continuous (James 1996 [1911])? Even Whitehead (1978: xii), who was otherwise never short of praise for the pragmatists, expressed his preoccupation to ‘rescue their type of thought from the charge of anti-intellectualism, which rightly or wrongly has been associated with it.’

In light of much of the historical reception that early pragmatist thought has enjoyed throughout the course of the twentieth-century, and especially in relation to social theory (Joas 1993), it might seem somewhat surprising to find that in a later essay by John Dewey (2008 [1927]: 10. emphasis added) titled ‘Philosophy and Civilization’, he makes what surely deserves the name of a cry, a plea that is *at once* speculative and pragmatic. A plea, in other words, ‘for the casting off of that intellectual timidity which hampers the wings of imagination, a *plea for speculative audacity*, for more faith in ideas, sloughing off a cowardly reliance upon partial ideas to which we are wont to give the name of facts.’

What, one might be tempted to ask, can possibly be the meaning of such a plea in the context of pragmatist thought? How might one put such a stark plea to the test? What kind of test might be relevant to it (Savransky 2016)? It seems to me that, in this case, there is only one way to provide an answer to such a question while at the same time taking it seriously. To construct a relevant test for it, one must take the risk of putting it to its own pragmatic test. That is, to experiment with the possible implications of such a plea by affirming, pragmatically, that the only ‘meaning’ it can have is no other than the difference it makes when it is put to the test of our experience, in this case, of our experience of pragmatist thought.

In order to take the risk of thinking with the difference that Dewey’s speculative plea can make, one must first recall and come to terms with what perhaps constitutes James’ and Dewey’s most foundational commitment. Namely, their investment in a radical empiricism that, as James (2003 [1912]: 22) famously put it, ‘must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced.’ A form of empiricism that regards experience itself as neither fixed nor fully contained in thought, as a dynamic plane on which, through which, thinking is cultivated, articulated, and transformed. Experience, James (2011 [1907]) would insist, comes in drops: it is active, dynamic and ever-changing, producing thought and putting it to its own tests and novel demands. Experience, in other words, ‘has ways of *boiling over,* and making us correct our present formulas’ (James 2011 [1907 [1907]: 142).

To approach the question of thinking in this empiricist way already makes perceptible two important consequences. First, and unlike various rationalist traditions, for which thought sustains a structuring relationship to experience, for pragmatists, thoughts are felt. Thoughts, in the concrete, ‘are made of the same stuff as things are’ *and must themselves be experienced* (James 2003 [1907]: 20)*.* Thus, no account of thought that seeks to take experience seriously can presuppose a thinker as an ‘observer’ in retreat from the flux of reality but must conceive of thinking itself as a component in the fact of experience. Thinking is always thinking with and in the midst of experience, becoming taken by an intellectual experience such that ‘the thought is itself the thinker, and psychology needs not look beyond.’ (James 1957 [1890]: 401).

Second, the drop-like, processual character of experiences that have ways of boiling over forces us to resist any temptation to make thought into a final operation that might be capable of capturing experience once and for all. ‘Canst thou by searching describe the Universe?’ (Whitehead 1967: 145)– while such a question is deeply ingrained in the history of modern thought, the pragmatist answer to it must be a resolute ‘no.’ There are no thoughts, or concepts, capable of adequately capturing the dynamic complexity of relationships in the world of experience. To claim the opposite is to incur in what Whitehead (ibid.) rightly termed ‘The Dogmatic Fallacy’. One cannot produce thoughts capable of capturing experience once and for all, but in the case of pragmatism this incapacity tells us less about the finitude of human thought, than about the deambulatory character of experience itself, both within and without the human. Error and the fallibility of thoughts pose no transcendental tragedies. Rather, they become inescapable events in every process of thought and knowledge, reminding us that experience boils over thought, and sometimes thought boils over experience. To the extent that thought is no longer outside experience, but it is part and parcel of an experienced world, all thinking is experimental. It unfolds and develops by way of connections and transitions that always involve the risk of a test whose criteria of success and failure are always immanent to the experiential mutation made possible by the connection in question.

I believe it is such a deeply empiricist account of thinking, and not any form of scientism, that explains the interest in scientific inquiry that characterises most patently the work of John Dewey, and more ambivalently, that of William James. Indeed, it is not, as commentators of pragmatism over the years have complained, that a certain scientific ethic provided the grounds for a pragmatist philosophy of life *tout court* (for a critical exploration of this claim see Manicas 1988). Rather, it was the experimental logic of inquiry, instead of the dogmatic idealism of nineteenth-century philosophical inquiry, that pragmatists saw as being already modelled upon immediate, everyday experience. In other words, because for both James and Dewey all experience is experimental, the so-called ‘scientific method’ provided a systematic and highly developed means of approaching the question of practical and intellectual experimentation. At stake, therefore, was the audacious production of a mode of thought that instead of forcing experience to stand still in order to claim cognitive victory over it, could partake in the flow of experience, contributing to the latter’s mutating, surprising, and novel drops.

In this sense, the whole of Dewey’s *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (2004 [1948]), for instance, may be read as an attempt to transform the longstanding dreams of a philosophy concerned with capturing that which is ‘immutable’ and ‘eternal’. An attempt at transforming the dreams of philosophers so that the latter might become relevant to a new world made possible by the ingression of modern scientific discoveries in technology, society, and politics. Such discoveries and operations, in his view, forced one to ‘abandon the assumption of fixity and to recognize that what for it is actually “universal” is *process’* (Dewey, 2004 [1948]: vii-viii. emphasis in original):

Until the dogma of fixed unchangeable types and species, of arrangement in classes of higher and lower, of subordination of the transitory individual to the universal or kind had been shaken in its hold upon the science of life, it was impossible that the new ideas and method should be made at home in social and moral life. Does it not seem to be the intellectual task of the twentieth century to take this step? When this step is taken the circle of scientific development will be rounded out and the reconstruction of philosophy be made an accomplished fact.

Similarly, and although James was arguably less invested in science than Dewey was (Gavin 1992), he too thought that no philosophy, be it natural or moral, could ignore scientific discoveries and methods, nor the buzzing world they make perceptible. Thus, in his famous essay on ethics, ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life’, he argued that ‘ethical science is just like physical science, and instead of being deducible all at once from abstract principles, must simply bide its time, and be ready to revise its conclusions from day to day.’ (James 1956 [1897]: 208).

The importance of reclaiming a pragmatist logic of experimentation in philosophy was not, however, only a matter of asserting the processual nature of reality. Although this remains no minor accomplishment, even to this day. Crucially, the logic of experimentation also made available an escape from the classical philosophical conundrum of trying to explain the process of knowing by means of a theory of consciousness, as if the latter would be so unproblematic a concept as to be capable of doing any ‘explaining’. The ‘problem of consciousness’ for pragmatism is clear enough: any theory of knowledge that presupposes consciousness as an entity, as the very onto-psychological ‘stuff‘ that makes knowledge possible, is forced to bifurcate reality into things-in-themselves, on the one hand, and the thought-of-things on the other. It is forced, in other words, to split the world into subject and object as absolute ontological terms. Radical empiricism, however, conceives of experience –‘pure experience’ in James (2003 [1912]); ‘primary experience’ in Dewey (1929)– not as that which a pre-existent phenomenological subject undergoes, but as the very fabric of which the world –including subjects and objects– is made. As David Lapoujade (2000, 2007) has rightly suggested, pure experience is neither subjective nor objective, but the ‘material’ out of which such distinctions are carved. As he puts it, the notion of

material does not allow itself to be conceived according to a matter/form relationship, no more than it can be said to be contained within the categories subject/object, matter/thought, etc. It is directly physical-mental. Material is neither Matter, nor Thought, though it is the fabric of both. (Lapoujade 2000: 194)

In this account, consciousness cannot explain the process of knowing because it already needs to be conceived as a specific relational process –itself experienced– by which the material drops of experience become connected. A connection through which ‘one of its “terms” becomes the subject or bearer of the knowledge, the knower, the other becomes the object known‘ (James 2003 [1912]: 3). The thought is itself the thinker. Though is an event of experience and as such it is not presupposed by consciousness. Rather, ‘thought goes on’, and it is the concept of consciousness which itself presupposes the going-on of thought (James 1957 [1890]: 225).

In this way, knowledge and thought do involve, but can hardly be reduced to, questions of cognition. They are, first and foremost, matters of practice and inquiry– of all those practices that contribute to the connection of elements in experience so that some of those elements can be said to be ‘known‘ while others can be said ‘to know’. It is this practical approach to thought that the logic of experimentation allows one to elucidate. As I will suggest, speculation, as an experimental mode of thinking, does not stand outside experience. Rather, it is itself a going-on of experience that, by cultivating its material in the mode of imaginative propositions, seeks to create the possibility of an experimental faith in the transformation of experience. Speculative pragmatism, then, designates an experimental mode harnessing experience such that new intelligent connections among things may become possible.

**The Wager of an Unfinished Present: On Speculative Experimentation**

To speculate, then, is to relate experimentally to experience. It is, in other words, to enable experience itself to take the risk of trusting its own becoming. Let us therefore explore in more depth just what might be at stake in this practice that I associate with the notion of ‘speculative experimentation’. As Dewey put it in *The Quest for Certainty* (2008 [1929]: 63. emphasis in original):

[Experimental inquiries] exhibit three outstanding characteristics. The first is the obvious one that all experimentation involves *overt* doing, the making of definite changes in the environment or in our relation to it. The second is that experiment is not a random activity but is directed by ideas which have to meet the conditions set by the need of the problem inducing the active inquiry. The third and concluding feature, in which the other two receive their full measure of meaning, is that the outcome of the directed activity is the construction of a new empirical situation in which objects are differently related to one another, and such that the *consequences* of directed operation form the objects that have the property of being *known*.

This is a rich and complex description, the full implications of which I hope will become clearer as this text proceeds. For the moment it is worth noting that while, for Dewey, the experimental production of ideas that might direct practices –also known as ‘thinking’– is already a crucial ingredient in any process of knowledge-making, it itself can be conceived in those terms too. In other words, what the pragmatist sense of experimentation makes present is that the experience of thought is not only one of *being felt* but also one of *feeling.* Thinking is not only passively empirical but also actively experimental, and it emerges whenever the present confronts one with perplexing facts, with difficulties that demand creative attention and the production of alternative patterns of contrast for, and of new forms of trust in, the construction of new empirical situations. As Dewey (2004 [1948]: 80) suggests elsewhere,

men (sic) do not, in their natural estate, think when they have no troubles to cope with, no difficulties to overcome. A life of ease, of success without effort, would be a thoughtless life, and so also would a life of ready omnipotence. Beings who think are beings whose life is so hemmed in and constricted that they cannot directly carry through a course of action to victorious consummation.

Not any problem, however, demands to be thought. In fact, for Dewey, whenever a problem is ‘completely actual and present, we are overwhelmed. We do not think, but give way to depression.’(ibid. 82) In contrast, for it to demand the practice of thought a problem needs to present itself as an ‘impending problem’*,* one that makes felt an *unfinished present* that is incomplete and developing, orienting us to what is yet to come. To that extent, ‘“[t]hought’ represents the suggestions of a way of response that is different from that which would have been followed if intelligent observation had not effected an inference as to the future’ (ibid. 83).

In this account, thus, speculative thought constitutes a mode of experimentation whose aim is that of producing suggestions, propositions or ideas that, by trusting the possible, might offer the necessary guidance to produce a different mode of response to an impending problem. As an experimental practice, the aim of speculation is to transform the trajectory of transitioning between present and future by providing an alternative path towards a novel empirical situation– towards a new experience. It is characterised by a form of creative responsiveness to problems that make the future itself pend upon the future that may be constructed for it, and as such, speculative experimentation is necessarily attentive to the facts through which the problem is composed, and it seeks a going-on that may stem from the possibilities emerging that the facts, and their relations, themselves make perceptible.

In other words, to the extent that thinking, in this experimental account, can be said to be speculative, it should not be thought of simply as a practice of wild imagination. For there is ‘a distinction between hypotheses generated in that seclusion from observable fact which renders them fantasies, and hypotheses that are projections of the possibilities of facts already in existence and capable of report.’ (Dewey 2008 [1929]: 63). And while the term ‘speculation’ often is often a term of abuse, one used to pejoratively characterise a practice that respects no constraints or is unconcerned with real events, to speak of speculative experimentation is precisely to highlight the fact that the consequences of those ‘imaginative speculations that recognize no law except their own dialectic consistency’ may be markedly different from those ‘which rest on an observable movement of events, and which foresee these events carried to a limit by the force of their own movement’. (ibid.) For while the former begin from ‘arbitrarily assumed premises’, and indeed rely on the dogmatic image that such premises afford in order to ascertain themselves, the ground of speculative experimentation is the problematic form that the material of experience can take, and its task is thus to set forth ‘the implications of propositions resting upon facts already vitally significant’. (ibid.).

Thus, for speculation to enable experience to trust its own becoming, to develop from impending problems propositions whose implications may contribute to the construction of an alternative future, speculative experimentation retains a humility to facts without however succumbing to them. Its own internal risk is that of becoming capable of developing an imagination that combines the freedom of the possible with the stubbornness of actuality. Like all forms of experimentation, speculation involves a wager, which in this case, is perhaps the most creative one, in the sense at least without it the meaning of very idea of ‘creativity’ begins to fade. *To speculate, thus, is to wager on the unfinished nature of the present*. For this reason, it encounters the facts of experience not as final but as the very material for speculation, as themselves exhibiting the possibility of an alternative that demands creative modes of intellectual experimentation. Is this speculative operation not the one that James (1996 [1911]: 65. emphasis in original) himself endowed concepts with, namely, that of ‘*harness[ing]* perceptual reality […] in order to drive it better to our ends’? As he put it:

Had we no concepts we would live simply ‘getting’ each successive moment of experience, as the sessile sea-anemone on its rock receives whatever nourishment the wash of the waves may bring. With concepts we go in quest of the absent, meet the remote, actively turn this way or that, bend our experience, and make it tell us whither it is bound. We change its order, run it backwards, jump about over its surface instead of plowing through its continuity string its items on as many ideal diagrams as our mind can frame. All these are ways of *handling* the perceptual flux and *meeting* distant parts of it. (James 1996 [1911]: 64)

The attention to fact and the harnessing of speculative flights by the risky development of real possibilities are thus crucial requirements of such form of experimental speculation, but as anyone who is minimally familiar with the practices of the experimental sciences might anticipate, there is yet a third element that needs to be taken into account whenever speculation is approached as an experiment in thinking. And this is that there is no experimentation, in the strong sense of the term, without a practice of putting to the test (Stengers 2000). Indeed, as the tradition of pragmatism has always been at pains to stress, the whole meaning and value of a practice, be it intellectual or otherwise, lies in the *differences it makes.* In other words, a speculative pragmatism cannot be understood without first entertaining the question of what, following Isabelle Stengers (2011), I associate with ‘speculative efficacy’– the question of the differences speculations make with regards to the experiences they connect.

The Question of Speculative Efficacy: Speculation, Truth, and The Test of Thought

Insofar as the radical empiricism underpinning the work of James and Dewey obligates us to account for anything and everything that is experienced, it also simultaneously situates experience itself as the risk that any speculative proposition, concept and idea must confront. Speculation emerges from the fabric of experience and its primary aim is to return to it, albeit in a transformed way. Indeed, to place experience as the very test of thought involves rescuing the latter from the hands of logicians, who have reduced the question of the efficacy of ideas and theories to a doctrine according to which ‘their one function is to be judged as to their truth or falsehood’ (Whitehead 1978: 184). Instead, both for the pragmatists and for Whitehead, judgements as to the truth of a proposition are always secondary and ‘very rare‘ components in their effects. By contrast, their primary function is that of becoming ‘a lure for feeling’, of effecting a transformation in experience:

The existence of imaginative literature should have warned logicians that their narrow doctrine is absurd. It is difficult to believe that all logicians as they read Hamlet’s speech, “To be, or not to be:…” commence by judging whether the initial proposition be true or false, and keep up the task of judgement throughout the whole thirty-five lines. Surely, at some point in the reading, judgement is eclipsed by aesthetic delight. The speech, for the theatre audience, is purely theoretical, a mere lure for feeling (Whitehead 1978: 185).

In other words, if speculative experimentations are to become worthy of attention –not to mention of actually taking the risks associated with them– it is not, primarily, because of a truth they might succeed in making manifest, but because of a difference they might be capable of effecting, a mode of becoming felt that might induce a transition into a new empirical situation.

As heirs and explorers of the experimental logic of inquiry, however, the concept of ‘truth’ and its meanings had actually much stronger a hold on pragmatists than it had on Whitehead. But it did not do so without at the same time undergoing a radical transformation of its implications, without a metamorphosis of the way in which ‘truth’ as such might take hold. For the truth of a proposition, in the pragmatic sense, is but *one particular manner in which they make themselves felt*, such that truth means nothing if not the extent to which an idea or a proposition ‘agrees‘ with reality:

Any idea that helps us to deal, whether practically or intellectually, with either the reality or its belongings, that doesn’t entangle our progress in frustrations, that *fits*, in fact, and adapts our life to the reality’s whole setting, will agree sufficiently to meet the requirement. It will be true of that reality. (James 2011 [1907]: 141-142)

Such a transformation, whose apparent simplicity risks making it radically misleading, has in fact always remained a locus of contestation and resistance around their work. Indeed, while for some it represented an outrageous form of instrumentalism, for others, to whom such a definition read as a kind of quirky formulation of a classical correspondence theory of truth, the pragmatist version was seen to be a veiled flirtation with logical positivism. In this latter case, an experimental success, which constitutes the very test of the efficacy of a hypothesis, has a retroactive effect. Namely, it functions by suggesting that, insofar as the techno-intellectual operations have been successful in attracting the interest of those the hypothesis addressed and did so just in the way it had predicted their attraction, the proof that success is seen to offer is one that speaks to the truth of *the hypothesis*. A truth, then, that is antecedent to the time frame of human knowledge, which is to say, that precedes the experiment itself (Stengers 2010). Understood in this way we might conclude –wrongly– that, as critics of pragmatism have repeatedly stated, if the proposition associated with an experimental success ‘agrees’ with reality it also ‘corresponds’ to it– its operation is that of disclosing some unchanging, intrinsic aspect of the world that precedes the experience itself. To recall Bertrand Russell’s (1912: 201-202) classic formulation of the correspondence theory, ‘the condition of the truth of a belief is something not involving beliefs […] but only the objects of the belief. A mind, which believes, believes truly when there is a *corresponding* complex not involving the mind, but only its objects. This correspondence ensures truth, and its absence entails falsehood.’

Entertained against the backdrop of an attempt –itself speculative– to make a speculative pragmatism possible, however, it becomes clear that confusing James’s theory of truth with a matter of ‘correspondence’ is a mistake. I believe the pragmatist theory of truth can be read in a different, much more interesting light. If the practice of speculative experimentation constitutes, as I argued in the previous section, a wager on the unfinishedness of the present, if it is an operation whose business is that of making thought *creative of an alternative future* by producing an inventive response to an impending problem, and by putting experience to the test of its own *becoming,* then to suggest that the ‘truth‘ of a speculative proposition depends upon its correspondence with a pre-existing complex of objects or state of affairs, would be simply absurd.

To be sure, insofar as both James and Dewey assume a processual account of experience, no operation performed upon the latter that is itself experienced can testify to a state of affairs that preceded it. To insist upon truth, then, is to retain the risk that characterises every form of experimentation while abandoning the modern metaphysics that underpinned it. Indeed, what this tension makes present, is that to the extent that speculative ideas may become ‘factors in the fact of experience’ (Whitehead 1958 [1929]: 80), or ‘integral factors in actions which change the face of the world’ (Dewey 2008 [1929]: 111), the test of speculative thought is not performed against a world such thinking would be said to uncover, but against the one to which it has already contributed to composing by means of its own addition to it. It is for this reason that we can say without contradiction and without cynicism, that the truth of speculative propositions is a matter of *efficacy*. A matter of the efficacy of a proposition to enter, and in its entering *infect*, the very manner in the world ‘goes on’. As Stengers (2011: 510) proposes, the concept of ‘infection’ designates the way in which different parts of the world enter into, and prehend, each other, and the success of such a process of infection

implies the co-adaptation of values. When a being endures, what has succeeded is a co-production between this being and “its” environment. This environment is nothing other than the totality of beings taken into account and valorized in a determinate way, and each of the valorized beings prehends the taking-into-account of which it has been the object, the role that has been assigned to it, in a way that is not incompatible with the maintenance of this mode of prehension, or this role. (Stengers 2011: 158)

To my mind, it is in this *infectious* manner that the term ‘agreement’ should be read in James’ pragmatic theory of truth. This is also what Dewey (2008 [1929]: 109) means when he suggests that ‘[t]he test of ideas, of thinking generally, is found in the consequences of the acts to which the ideas lead, that is in the new arrangements of things which are brought into existence.’ In other words, whenever speculative experimentation is at stake, the pragmatist theory of truth should not be thought of as a correspondence theory that would relate the success of a speculative proposition to a state of affairs that could be said to precede it, but presents itself as what I would here call, tentatively, a *corresponsive* theory of truth. For what it is put to the test is the transformation of experience enabled by the speculative proposition itself– the degree and the manner in which all those parts of the world to which the proposition connects have agreed to become infected by it, to meet the requirements it poses, while simultaneously infecting *it,* forcing it to take its own world into account.

That is why ‘[t]he truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process, the process namely of verifying itself, its veri*fication.‘* (James 2011 [1907]: 141). Thus, a speculative proposition becomes ‘true’ to the extent that it succeeds in *infecting* its environment while allowing itself to become infected by it. Indeed, it seems to me that the ‘truth’ of a proposition is nowhere to be found if not in the very process whereby a proposition and its world begin, little by little, drop by drop, to respond to each other. What, at the end of the day, deserves to be call ‘true’, is the event of the future experience that such an exchange has enabled to come into existence.

Trust in The Future: Speculative Pragmatism for a World of *Ifs*

To characterise the test of the efficacy of speculation in this way is to suggest, then, that making thought creative of the future involves indeed a *wager* and not a process of unilateral ‘production’ or ‘performativity’ that simply takes the effect of our efforts for granted (cf. Law & Urry 2004). To take the risk of enabling experience to be put to the risk of its own becoming is simultaneously to acknowledge that what is at stake is the very manner in which a future may come into existence, and that, as James (1996 [1911]: 229. emphasis in original) expressed it, its coming into existence depends not just on the power of the proposition itself, but on ‘a pluralism of independent powers.’ A speculative proposition, then, is neither self-sufficient nor almighty, but shall succeed only *if* others, with whom the proposition may be concerned, contribute to its success:

Its 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. […] As individual members of a pluralistic universe, we must recognize that, even though we do *our* best, the other factors also will have a voice in the result. If they refuse to conspire, our good-will and labor may be thrown away. No insurance company can here cover us or save us from the risks we run in being part of such a world. (ibid.)

Thus, speculating in a pluralistic, processual world, in a world whose destiny hands by a lot of *ifs,* involves the wager, but never the promise, that the future itself might agree to respond to what one might *propose* to it. As I have suggested, such a wager on the possibility that a proposition and its world may begin to respond to each other, itself poses on those concerned with speculation, its own responsibility. That of a manner of proposing that, once launched into the developing edge of the present, may themselves be responsive to the world’s own mode of replication, such a collective response to the impending problems that present poses may be possible. If, as Whitehead (1958 [1929]: 76) had emphatically claimed, ‘abstract speculation has been the salvation of the world’ such that ‘[t]o set limits to speculation is treason to the future’, I suggest that it is not because of any guarantees that some speculative logic or method may provide. Indeed, it provides none. Rather, setting limits to speculation betrays the future because there is no ‘future’, in the sense of it being more than the mere extension of the present, that comes about without a speculative wager, without risking a thinking-experience by trusting in the possibility that a world might become responsive to our efforts.

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