

Logics of Ecstasy

by Steven Le breton

Some exceptional experiences give us access to a different reality from the one we encounter in our everyday lives. In the twentieth century, a number of philosophers explored these experiences in the pursuit of a new form of empiricism.

About: Stéphane Madelrieux, *Philosophie des expériences radicales*, Paris, Seuil, 2022, 400 pages, 24 €.

The Paradox of “Metaphysical Empiricism”

Stéphane Madelrieux’s book, *Philosophie des expériences radicales* (Philosophy of radical experiences), proposes to reread major authors of twentieth-century French philosophy through the lens of “metaphysical empiricism,” a program that values “radical experiences,” not only as exceptional in character, but as revealing of a higher order of reality. Madelrieux describes and analyzes this program, and ultimately criticizes it in the conclusion. The radical experiences in question are very diverse in nature: mystical ecstasy, literary experience, “*déjà vu*” impressions, drunkenness, erotic effusion, madness.

The expression “metaphysical empiricism” is somewhat surprising: Was not the whole point of classical British empiricism, initiated by Locke and radicalized by Hume, to provide tools for the skeptical critique of metaphysics? By acknowledging the limits of the human mind, empiricism refocuses our attention on ordinary

experience and discourages any vain excursion towards an uncertain transcendence. Classical empiricism invites the philosopher to show humility: The philosopher is no different from vulgar men and has no access to a higher order of reality; at most he or she is more precise, reflective, and methodical. While experience is a guide that helps us mature, it does not have the power to transfigure us.

By contrast, the French metaphysical empiricism discussed by Madelrieux is radical in the sense that metaphysics is radical: Like metaphysics, it claims to reveal behind appearances a presumably more fundamental reality. However, it does not propose to cross the limits of experience—as classical metaphysics does—but to transcend the limits of ordinary experience towards a higher empiricism. From this perspective, some exceptional experiences give us access to an order of reality that is qualitatively distinct from ordinary experience (ontological thesis), less illusory because beyond appearances (epistemological thesis), and existentially and morally superior, even sacred (moral thesis). Madelrieux thus defines metaphysical empiricism as “the gesture of immanentizing the metaphysical difference between appearance and reality on the plane of experience” (p. 236).

Within what he calls metaphysical empiricism, Madelrieux distinguishes a first trio of thinkers—Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean Wahl—who invite us to regress towards “pure experiences” (immediate, simple, and ontologically primary experiences that presuppose a form of asceticism). In the same way that Thoreau simplified his life to regain direct contact with reality, these thinkers propose to purge experience of the mediations that veil a deeper reality. The second trio identified by the author—Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Michel Foucault—accords a special status to “limit-experiences” (experiences oriented towards norm transgression, excess, and intensity and tending towards the dissolution of the subject of experience). Beyond the differences between these two trios, Madelrieux captures the unity of a common program: the program of metaphysical empiricism.

“To Be is Not to be Useful”: Bergson and Deleuze

According to Madelrieux, metaphysical empiricists have unanimously linked ordinary, “merely empirical” experience to the practical domain of action by contrasting it with radical experience, which presupposes a relationship to the world detached from action. Madelrieux insists on this opposition that is central to Bergson

and to his disciple Deleuze. Bergson's pragmatist anthropology presents man as a "sporting animal" (p. 82), a being above all turned towards action. Whether in reflex action, habit, or intelligent action (the latter being less mechanical and more attuned to the particularity of situations), we perceive and organize the world only insofar as it is "at hand," for the purpose of reacting to it in a way that is useful to life. The author recalls clearly and in detail that technology, magic, instituted religions, and ordinary language are for Bergson manifestations of practical intelligence. Thus, according to Bergson, action is the constitutive principle of ordinary human experience, which he considers to be inferior because it makes us see in things only what is useful to us.

As Bergson explains, we can only elevate ourselves to a higher, intuitive experience by suspending any complete relationship with the world and by isolating ourselves from the demands of social interaction—like the mystic or artist, that "anti-sporting" being who knows how to see things for themselves, for pleasure, and not with a view to action. To perceive the apple as "a certain dynamic harmony of shapes and colors" (p. 114) does not just yield a different perception, but a truer, more direct and unmediated one. Similarly, the past is only revealed in its purity when memory is no longer in the service of action, as in the case of drowning victims or those condemned to death who see their past flash by precisely because they no longer have any hold on the present or future. In these exceptional circumstances, the mind reveals itself to itself in its own reality, breaking with the pragmatic regime of ordinary experience.

Experience and Its Double

Madelrieux insists on the dualities that structure metaphysical empiricism: To the distinction between regimes of experience (ordinary/radical) corresponds a distinction between regimes of reality. Thus, in the "*déjà vu*" experience analyzed by Bergson, perception splits, as does the subject who is engaged in a present situation yet also has the impression of contemplating it as a memory. This experience, which is qualitatively and ontologically distinct from ordinary perception, reveals the past as a contemporary of the present, and its essence is to "not act" and to exist only for oneself. In his reading of Bergsonian analyses, Deleuze presents genuine thought as the access to this virtual half, to the higher (because useless) double of all things. Genuine thought entails going beyond the ordinary regime of experience, which is oriented towards the recognition of the same with a view to prediction and action. Thus,

according to Deleuze, the Proustian madeleine experience is a revelatory ecstasy for the narrator, not because his memory trivially re-identifies a madeleine from its faded trace, nor because it reminds him of his past in Combray (the logic of re-cognition). As Deleuze explains in *Proust and Signs*, the meaning of this ecstasy is to make Combray appear “in a splendor, with a ‘truth’ that never had an equivalent in reality.” The madeleine experience is neither the reminder of a bygone past nor an actual present, but an unprecedented third term: an essence. It is through the apprehension of this type of “qualitative difference” that thought becomes creative—as evidenced by the modern work of art, freed from the project of imitating or representing reality.

According to Madelrieux, this duality is present in Deleuzian film philosophy, which grants action an inferior status, as Bergson himself does. The plot of the action film consists in the transformation of an initial situation into a final one through a sequence of actions performed by an individual or a group who react to that which they perceive and are affected by. The sequence of images is then subordinated to the different phases of action. Similar to Bergson who contrasts contemplative spiritual life and action, Deleuze contrasts what he calls the time-image (which manifests spiritual life and a non-pragmatic regime of the image) and the action-image. Deleuze argues that in the twentieth century a “cinema of the seer” (Italian neo-realism, French New Wave, American independent cinema), featuring contemplative, wandering characters detached from all worldly affairs and even from their own lives, distinguished itself from action cinema.

This shift, which concerns perception, logically applies to the other faculties: imagination, memory, and language. Thus, as Madelrieux observes, a basic ontological thesis runs from Bergson to Deleuze: “To be is not to be useful, and only that which has ceased to be useful truly begins to be” (p. 158). However, whereas Bergson seeks only to recover the deep self beneath the social self, Deleuze embraces the distance from the ordinary self and its empirical determinations, and therefore the depersonalization and desubjectivation of what he calls the “transcendental field.” For Deleuze, that which truly thinks and “experiences” in the radical experience is an “asubjective, un-conscious, impersonal, non-human” power (p. 161). As Madelrieux sums up: “In order not to reduce higher metaphysical experience to lower empirical experience, one had to go so far as to think an experience without a subject” (p. 162).

Limit-Experiences: Putting the Subject to the Test

Are asceticism, introspection, and contemplation the only or best means for the desubjectivation or even the transfiguration towards which radical experience tends? As Madelrieux explains at the start of the second part of the book, the “purification of experience” can also involve excess, transgression, endangerment, and the sacrifice of what the empirical self holds dear. The etymology of the word “experience” indicates a trial, a crossing, a danger, which are also expressed by the German *Erfahrung*. The limit-experiences referred to here (mystical ecstasy, erotic ecstasy, madness, drunkenness, literary experience) have in common their proximity to death, and they are often those that reasonable humanity has sought to enclose, domesticate, and in some cases repress. The “limits” in question are: first, the limit imposed from the outside, that which the limit-experience transgresses (for instance, the social rules that divert the mystic from his or her connection to God); second, the limit understood as the extreme term, reached in the deployment of a power (free experience is that which gives all that it can give); and, finally, the ideal point of a progression, which cannot be attained (since all intensification tends towards the temporary or definitive death of the subject, and therefore of experience itself).

The path of “limit-experiences,” taken by Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Michel Foucault, joins that of “pure experiences,” with the common horizon of the dissolution of the subject, presented as a liberating transfiguration, and a certain anti-humanism. The point is to overcome the practical, calculating, hard-working man, the body that adapts and aims first and foremost for security and preservation, and to set up the extreme and the intense as evaluation criteria.

The Secularization of Mystical Experience, or, the Immanent Sacred

Breaking with ordinary experience, mystical experience is a prime example of radical experience (especially in Bergson), since it implies the negation of some of the frameworks and limitations imposed by institutions, social life, and the arbitrary and schematic divisions of ordinary language, which fail to capture the divine absolute. In freeing us from these limitations, mystical asceticism aims to bring closer to communion with God. Yet, is not mystical ecstasy still too subordinated to a belief in

transcendence and a project of post-mortem salvation to be purely immanent? Madelrieux shows precisely how the mystical paradigm was secularized in Bataille's "dark" and "atheological" Bergsonianism. Bataille gives metaphysical meaning to non-religious ecstasies like drunkenness and erotic experience. Eroticism, provided it is experienced for its own sake and not subordinated to a project (for instance, giving life), tends to abolish the limits that separate individuals and to reconnect with the gratuity and fundamental uselessness of the movement of life, which is as fertile as it is violent and destructive. The profane/sacred duality is renewed in experience through the ordinary experiences/limit-experiences duality. Limit-experiences, in their secularized form (lacking transcendence, a horizon of meaning, or a causal divine authority), present the formal characteristics of the sacred: grace, mystery, revelation, conversion, salvation.

Literature: An Alternative Regime of Experience

As Madelrieux explains, in the philosophies of "limit-experience," literature is also given a subversive and liberating status—for instance, in Foucault—and even a religious one—in Blanchot. Whereas psychiatry reduced madness to a mental illness opposed to reason and self-control, Foucault conceives literature as a space with the capacity to "trouble language," one that can welcome limit-experiences and dissolve the separation and hierarchy between delirium and reason. According to Blanchot, the literary work, which can evade or twist the typical uses and practical function of ordinary language, has the potential to revive the sense of the sacred within language. However, literature is not art for art's sake, since that which is sacralized is not the literary work. Nor is literature an experience of the sacred—in contrast to early poetry and art, which celebrated and gave form to this experience. Rather, it is a *sacred experience* in the age of the death of God. Indeed, for Blanchot, the literary work is *more than literature*. Lautréamont, the Surrealists, Rimbaud, and Gide made it a means of experimentation and self-testing: "a vital experience, an instrument of discovery, a means for man to test himself, to tempt himself, and in this attempt to seek to surpass his own limits" (pp. 191-192). *Contra* Sartre, for whom the prose writer, like ordinary man, uses words to act and engages with reality by revealing it in a certain way, Blanchot considers that the essence of language is to move one away from empirical reality and the self and towards an alternative regime of experience. As Madelrieux observes, for Blanchot to speak "is to make absent, even to kill," something that

literature can fully accomplish. Thus, the literary work cannot be interpreted in terms of the biography and psychology of its author because it is a vehicle for transgressing the limits of the empirical self. In contrast to everyday language, literature is the “language of the night” (p. 195), a separate space that Blanchot turned into a religion, with its prophets (writers), its sacred objects (words), its community (the literary community), and its salvation which entails the “death” of the ordinary empirical individual.

Naturalistic Empiricism *vs.* Metaphysical Empiricism: The Author’s Critique

Thus, by asserting the centrality of the category of experience, Madelrieux’s book captures with erudition and clarity the unity of a “research program” (a concept developed by the philosopher of science Imre Lakatos, which Madelrieux feels justified in borrowing by adapting it to philosophy). Within the program of metaphysical empiricism, the division between the philosophers of pure experience and those of limit-experience is in fact a provincial one. For Madelrieux, the fundamental philosophical difference lies between naturalist empiricists—for whom consciousness can be explained from a context, a set of reactions to an environment—and metaphysical empiricists—for whom consciousness can break with this practical regime of experience to access another order of reality, such as Bergson’s spiritual *élan vital*. William James, a naturalist empiricist who nevertheless opened the door to transcendence, stands at the crossroads and is therefore of particular interest to Madelrieux. James’s oscillation is reflected in his dual posterity: mystical in Bergson, pragmatist and naturalist in John Dewey and Richard Rorty. Without denying the interest and specificity of exceptional experiences, Madelrieux subscribes to the naturalist approach and criticizes metaphysical empiricism for renewing the dualisms of classical metaphysics. In his view, this philosophy of rupture is also fundamentally conservative: Despite its subversive veneer, it is ultimately “still too pious.” Indeed, how can we hope to improve ourselves and our ordinary existence if salvation consists in turning away from it like the philosopher walks out of the cave?

One might regret that this critique and the naturalistic approach are developed only in the conclusion, were it not for the fact that they will be the subject of a second

volume (now in preparation), in which the author will precisely propose to “deradicalize experience” ...

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