

The Modern Legacy of William James' *A Pluralistic Universe*

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Perhaps no name is more clearly associated with the formulation of American psychology than that of William James. Yet, one of James' (1909) last published works, *A Pluralistic Universe*, is little known and rarely cited in the discipline. On the 100th anniversary of the publication of this book, the authors of this special issue of *The Journal of Mind and Behavior* explore the past, present, and future legacy of the provocative ideas contained in this volume for psychology, including the history of psychology, scientific fragmentation and ethics, the philosophy of science, psychological methods and theories, the psychology of religion, the multicultural movement, and the path of psychology in general.

As Joseph Jacobs (1909) wrote in one of the first reviews of this book, James intended these ideas to “revolutionize” not only psychology but also philosophy. Indeed, the challenging nature of James' conceptions prompted Jacobs to speculate that “it must have required some courage for Prof. William James to have delivered these brilliant lectures before Oxford audiences.” The significance of the ideas was also clear, even at this early stage in the life of the book. The problems discussed in this book, according to Jacobs, “are fundamental and deal with the highest interests of the humanity [sic]” (p. 419). As we will see, the authors of this special issue of the *Journal* clearly support these early judgments.

Why, then, was this book so ignored in James' own discipline of psychology? Here again, Jacobs' initial review seems prescient—James conveyed the ideas in such an abstract manner that even sophisticated audiences experienced problems in comprehending them. In fact, as Jacobs rightly reports, James felt he had to apologize “again and again . . . for the abstract and

abstruse nature of his topics.” Although Jacobs believed, as many others, that James’ “skill in presentation of abstract thought” was “greater than any living writer,” Jacobs admitted that James’ “latest production” was “his least attractive, from a literary point of view” (p. 419).

With this historical context, the authors of this special issue understand their contemporary task. They are to bring important, but relatively overlooked and difficult-to-understand, ideas to life in the context of the current issues of psychology. As it happens, the authors report that this task was easier to accomplish than they first thought. James’ critique, unlike perhaps the era of its inception, seems so relevant to the present problems of psychology that his “solution” has become doubly intriguing. Indeed, if taken seriously, James’ pluralism could inspire all sorts of new paths, conceptualizations, and research questions for the future of the discipline.

William Woody and Wayne Viney (this issue) begin this explication and application with a historically rich introduction to *A Pluralistic Universe*, including its 1908 source, the Hibbert lectures. In spite of his ailing health, James could not resist the opportunity to further develop his critique of monism and endorsement of pluralism. For James the monism-pluralism issue is, in the words of Woody and Viney, “the greatest issue the human mind can frame.” Unfortunately, from the authors’ perspective, this issue has largely been ignored in psychology in light of its historically monistic theorizing. However, recent unification crises in science afford renewed relevance to James’ seemingly prophetic call for pluralism.

The next two articles illustrate how James’ emphasis on the individual and perspectival nature of experience serves to prevent the monistic excesses of our modern age. First, David Leary (this issue) demonstrates how James’ pluralism bridges the tension between epistemology (how we take the world to be) and ethics (how we wish the world to be). In some ways the

world resists us, but in other ways we resist the world. The ethical hero, for James, is a risk-taking advocate of the individuality (or particularity) of experience, in opposition to the simplified monistic enterprises that overlook such individuality.

In a similar vein, George Howard and Cody Christopherson (this issue) argue that “pluralism unfortunately is often avoided...” because of its complexity and uncertainty in comparison to the simplified and yet “delusional” monism that dominates our age. These authors also contend that a Jamesian pluralism is badly needed in modern philosophies of science as a practical antidote for “both the extreme realist/objectivist and the extreme constructivist/relativist camps.” They use the data on faulty human reasoning to help make the case for the perspectivalism and “intellectual humility” of pluralism.

The remaining three articles address the relevance of James’ pluralism in contemporary psychological research. First, Edwin Gantt and Brent Melling (this issue) explore the need for greater pluralism in psychology of religion research. They discuss, in particular, the monism associated with the “a-theistic” reductionism of the mainstream psychology of religion research, much of which reveals little if anything about “religious phenomena *qua* religious phenomena.” In the spirit of James, Gantt and Melling contend that a genuine understanding of such phenomena requires a plurality of methods and theories, including theistic ones.

Next, Bradford Wiggins (this issue) discusses how a Jamesian pluralism is helpful for reconciling the recent “method wars” surrounding qualitative and quantitative research. Wiggins specifically addresses recent “mixed-methods” approaches in psychology and other sciences, arguing that these integrative approaches typically fail to achieve the pluralism they seek. Rather, these approaches ultimately assume a monistic worldview that considers one method as fundamental (typically quantitative methods in psychology) and the other as merely

supplementary. Wiggins seeks to correct this problem by providing seven features of a Jamesian pluralism that allow mixed-methods researchers to attain the methodological pluralism they desire.

Finally, Dennis Wendt and Brent Slife (this issue) argue that psychology should learn from the increasing calls for pluralism across the natural and social sciences. Even in the “traditional bastions of monism,” physics and economics, there is not only an increasing dissatisfaction with monistic theories and methods but also an increasing recognition of the empirical support and practical relevance of a “strong” (Jamesian) pluralism. Psychology is also in need of this pluralism, they argue, but the discipline is mired in uncritical, monistic commitments to universal theories and operationist method. Wendt and Slife describe the problems these commitments present and also provide solutions they believe James would proffer for turning his old discipline into a pluralistic science.

References

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