

William James and the Challenge of Methodological Pluralism

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Psychologists increasingly support the development of a methodological pluralism for research applications. Methodological pluralism, particularly as conceptualized by William James, can provide important benefits, such as a shift away from the totalizing hegemony of the received view of science and the formulation of deeper, more clear accounts of psychological life. Before such a methodological pluralism can be viable, however, psychologists must secure a theoretically coherent set of methods and an indigenous epistemology. Failure to address these concerns not only decreases the likelihood that psychologists will formulate a coherent account of psychological life, but also increases the likelihood that psychology will suffer from increased fragmentation and perhaps dissolution as an autonomous discipline.

William James is counted among the prominent progenitors of psychology. His legacy lives on as a former president of the American Psychological Association, as the author of its first American text *The Principles of Psychology* (James, 1890/1981), and as co-founder of pragmatism (1907/1978), a method for doing philosophy which (in some form or other) gave life to notable movements in psychology such as functionalism (Angell, 1907; Carr, 1925), behaviorism (Watson, 1913; cf. Robinson, 1986), instrumentalism (Dewey, 1920/1957), phenomenology (Edie, 1987), and neo-functionalism (Katz, 1960). Indeed, it appears that contemporary psychology is much indebted to Williams James, both for his influential participation in the discipline, and for his innovative thinking in general.

Despite James's powerful influence, however, it has been argued that psychology does not, at bottom, constitute the kind of discipline that James

would endorse. For example, historian of psychology Daniel Robinson (1993) points out that contemporary psychology, which continues to privilege a positivist-like approach to inquiry, while borrowing metaphors from the "machine shop," fails to satisfactorily accommodate three essential aspects of Jamesian thinking: pluralism, mentalism, and pragmatism. In the absence of these essential aspects, Robinson argues, there is scarcely a trace of Jamesian thinking to be found in psychology.

Literature from less mainstream quarters, on the other hand, appears to advocate at least one aspect of Jamesian thinking: pluralism — or more specifically, *methodological pluralism* (Polkinghorne, 1983). Methodological pluralism is generally upheld as a rigorous approach to investigation that allows many different methods to be employed and perspectives to be taken (with "method" broadly defined as a way of answering questions [see Polkinghorne, 1983, pp. 4–9]). Now it appears that calls for such pluralism, in varied form, are receiving increased support from many sources (e.g., Bevan, 1991; Hoshmand, 1989; Hoshmand and Martin, 1994; Howard, 1983, 1984, 1986; Koch, 1959, 1981; Manicas and Secord, 1983; Polkinghorne, 1983, 1984, 1991; Slife and Williams, 1995).

In what follows, I examine the possibility of methodological pluralism from the perspectives of Jamesian philosophy and contemporary psychology. I argue that a tenable methodological pluralism demands that diverse methods cohere in Jamesian fashion, and provides an integrated and internally consistent (though manifold) view of psychological life. Moreover, I argue that the requirements of weak and strong coherence — the former which pertains to coherence within research programs, and the latter which pertains to coherence across the discipline — must be met before methodological pluralism can provide such an integrated view. Finally, I set out two questions that once answered, will lay the groundwork for fostering such coherence within a methodologically plural psychology.

Jamesian Noetic Pluralism

According to James, the world of our experience does not come "ticketed and labeled," ready made and independent of human interpretation (James, 1907/1978). Rather, we live in a "plastic" world that requires interpretation and, to a certain extent, construction.¹ Although, for James, there was a common, sensible core of reality, it is the interpreting human being that constructs

¹As Robinson (1993) points out, James did not endorse a radical constructionism, like that seen in the writings of Gergen (e.g., 1985). James's conception, sometimes referred to as humanism (1907/1978), held that independent facts exist, and that these facts are open to human interpretation. James's writings suggest that these facts, to a certain degree, predetermine the nature of our knowledge (e.g., 1907/1978, lecture XV).

the world of his or her experience. According to James, we, as world constructors, interpret our experience largely through *common sense*. Common sense refers to the fundamental set of categories (i.e., beliefs, ideas) bequeathed unto us by our forbearers. Common sense categories provide the means by which we successfully interpret the world and function therein. These categories, in Jamesian fashion, are maintained insofar as they lead us prosperously from one part of our experience to another. New categories, beliefs, and ideas, which are woven into our extant mass of categories, come about as new experiences and old truths combine, "mutually modifying one another" (James, 1907/1978, p. 83). Our common sense categories and our experience are in this way co-constituting.

For James, then, it was through common sense that we endow experience with meaning. However, James recognized other noetic approaches, viz., science and critical philosophy (among others), that can also help us interpret and understand our experience (James, 1907/1978). Thus, for James, there were at least three distinct ways or levels of thinking. Further, James said that no one of these levels appears to be more truthful than others; rather, each has its own kind of merit. For example, scientific inquiry is appropriate for answering certain kinds of questions, while common sense and critical philosophy are appropriate for other spheres of endeavor. James was clear on this when he said:

There is no ringing conclusion possible when we compare these types of thinking, with a view to telling which is more absolutely true . . . Common sense is better for one sphere of life, science for another, philosophic criticism for a third; but whether either be truer absolutely, heaven only knows. (1907/1978, p. 93)

Thus, according to James, there is no universal, timeless standard for deliberating among the absolute truth value of any of these noetic approaches. Each noetic approach, the extent to which it is useful or truthful at all, is to be employed and evaluated within the appropriate sphere or context. Although there is no universal, timeless method for securing truth, and no single appropriate kind of knowledge, there can be a plurality of noetic approaches, each of which can be employed (perhaps tentatively) in the proper sphere of endeavor, and each of which can offer useful interpretations in context.

Methodological Pluralism in Psychology

Contemporary psychology, in contrast, has adopted two fundamental beliefs that clash with Jamesian noetic pluralism: that a *single* method provides the foundation for all legitimate knowledge, and (consequently) that this method — the *received view* of science — is the appropriate investigative

tool for all psychological questions. According to the received view (i.e., the traditional positivistic view, which came to ascendancy in the 19th century and which has subsequently informed scientific psychology [cf. Danziger, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1983]), clearly defined subject matter are to be observed and measured by an ostensibly detached observer, the presence of whom is considered causally *unrelated* to the phenomena under examination. Because no interaction is thought to take place between the observer and the observed, the nature of an independent reality is thought to be objectively ascertained. This conception of science — privileged as the single foundation for knowledge — has largely informed psychological methodology to the exclusion of other systems of inquiry (Giorgi, 1970; Polkinghorne, 1983). Indeed, many theories and methods within psychology have simply been ruled out of court on the basis that they do not pass scientific muster (e.g., Crews, 1996; cf. Tart, 1983).

Despite the historically privileged status of the scientific method, however, scientific foundationalism has been called into question by twentieth century philosophers who reason that there is no objective, independent reality to be represented via the language of science (Davidson, 1984; Feyerabend, 1975; Hesse, 1980; Putnam, 1981; Rorty, 1979). Prominent scientists have supported this notion, recognizing that the way nature reveals itself depends on the question asked, the perspective taken, and the type of method employed (e.g., Bohm, 1980; Bohr, 1934; Heisenberg, 1972; Schrödinger, 1983). In fact, it is sometimes the case that contradictory results are accrued when using different methods or tools to ask similar questions. Because there is no access to an independent reality, via a single, sufficient method, many have argued that multiple methods should be employed, each of which can provide heuristic accounts of nature, and each of which seem particularly suited for answering certain kinds of questions (Feyerabend, 1975; Rorty, 1981; Roth, 1987). Along with James, these thinkers argue that a solitary reliance on the scientific method reduces the likelihood that profitable advances might be made.

Many psychologists agree with these philosophers of science — viewing psychological inquiry as the asking of questions, while arguing that not all questions may be profitably answered using the same method (e.g., Howard, 1986; Koch, 1959; Polkinghorne, 1983). Indeed, methodological pluralists in psychology hold that there are many questions which do not lend themselves to scientific investigation at all, for example: What is the nature of religious experience (James, 1902/1929)? A principal advocate of methodological pluralism, Donald Polkinghorne, has stated it this way:

There is no one method which is the correct method for conducting human science research. The point of view taken [by Polkinghorne] is pluralistic in regard to methods and logics. There are various systems of inquiry that the researcher can use. Instead of trying to adapt one tool — whether it be statistical induction or existential—

phenomenological description or something else — the researcher must try to select the research system that is appropriate for answering the particular questions he or she is addressing. (1983, p. 280)

Moreover, methodological pluralists argue that multiple investigative approaches allow for deeper and more clear understandings of psychological phenomena to emerge. Polkinghorne asserts: “As the community considers various knowledge claims, it can deepen and clarify its understanding of a topic through the integration of the results derived by various systems of inquiry described here” (1983, p. 252). More comprehensive accounts can then be rendered as diverse profiles (e.g., phenomenological, biological, social, historical) — derived through different methods — are combined into a single picture that does not omit crucial details of psychological life. The value of methodological pluralism, then — indeed, the genuine strength of methodological pluralism — lies in its ability to provide such diverse profiles of psychological life, and to concatenate those profiles into an integrated whole (Polkinghorne, 1983, pp. 252–256 [see also, Bryman, 1984; Denzin, 1978; Hoshmand, 1989; Howard, 1984; Sechrest and Sidani, 1995]).

The Challenge of Methodological Pluralism

In rejecting the received view of science, including its commitment to an independent reality and a single method, methodological pluralists advocate flexibility and diversity in investigative approaches. Such flexibility can allow the most suitable methods to be applied, while enabling deeper, more integrated accounts to be formulated (cf. Polkinghorne, 1983). By these lights, methodological pluralism has the potential to bring much needed methodological, and perhaps theoretical, sophistication to psychological research.

Despite this growing support for methodological pluralism, however, a number of psychologists are concerned that such pluralism in fact obscures, rather than clarifies, our understanding of psychological life. This is so, because methodological pluralism ushers in a state where many incompatible and competing knowledge claims are simultaneously proffered (e.g., Minke, 1987; Rychlak, 1988; Schneider, 1992; Staats, 1991). In this case, the integration of knowledge claims cannot occur because results produced by different methods entail fundamentally incompatible descriptions and fundamentally incompatible meanings. Even when the basic phenomena under investigation are the same, the methodological approaches often differ so widely that their results cannot all be true at the same time. In response, these concerned psychologists typically call for unity through adherence to some variant of the received view of science. While other psychologists favor methodological pluralism in general, they too sense that incompatible

knowledge claims, resulting from the use of different methods, impede progress in psychological science, or make it difficult for any progress that occurs to be monitored (e.g., Hoshmand and Martin, 1994; Slife and Williams, 1997; Yanchar and Kristensen, 1996).

Such commentaries suggest that important questions regarding the tenability of methodological pluralism have gone unanswered. The most important of these questions, upon which the viability of methodological pluralism turns, is simply: Can methods — as currently constituted in psychology — produce a clear and integrated (albeit manifold) picture of psychological life? As I shall illustrate now, through an examination of method *per se*, and through an examination of psychology's methodological state, the answer to this question is no.

An examination of method *per se* shows that methods are not vehicles for securing truth about an independent reality, but rather are theoretical languages² themselves based on background assumptions or logically prior truth claims about reality (Slife and Williams, 1995, pp. 182–195; [see also Gadamer, 1975; Giorgi, 1970; Robinson, 1985; Wygant, 1991; Yanchar and Kristensen, 1996]). That is, methods are historically and theoretically formed tools — based on implicit background assumptions regarding the nature of reality — that organize the world of experience according to these assumptions. Nature, in turn, is “plastic” and generally yields to our investigations; it tends to reveal itself in ways that accommodate the method we employ and the theory we test (cf. Bohm, 1980; James, 1907/1978).

In this sense, no process–content distinction can be drawn between the method used and the subject matter under investigation (cf. Davidson, 1984). The two are part and parcel of the same whole; the method, *qua* process, could not be formed without some sense of what the subject matter (and thus the findings) would be like; and the subject matter (or findings), *qua* content, would not be justified as having real existence without *some* method to make them so.³ Understood this way, any method is itself a theory about what constitutes proper data, how such data are to be collected, and how interpretations are appropriately formulated (Slife and Williams, 1997). It is possible, of course, to alter the background assumptions that inform a given method, and thus to change the theoretical nature of the accounts provided. In any event, findings accrued by a given method will reflect the assumptions upon which that method is based.

²A “language” in the sense of a vocabulary that contributes to the organization of reality.

³Robinson (1985, pp. 10–11) argues similarly by illustrating that any response to the ontological question predetermines one's response to the epistemological question (and vice versa). For example, if we decide that what has fundamental existence are material entities capable of producing sensory stimulation, then we *ipso facto* predecide an empirical epistemology.

Like all methods, the received view of science is informed by background assumptions and thus produces certain kinds of accounts. Specifically, the received view is informed by assumptions which hold that research questions are properly answered on empirical grounds, and that nature exists fundamentally as material entities capable of providing sensory stimulation (Robinson, 1985). In this way, the received view assumes an empirical epistemology and a materialist ontology. Moreover, the received view is based on the notion that such material entities are lawfully determined *across time* (i.e., material and efficient causation), that the reality of these entities and forces exists independent of the inquirer, and that the proper way to investigate questions regarding them is through objective, systematic observation.

In using the received view of science, psychologists, perhaps inadvertently, affirm each of these assumptions. This means that any subject matter investigated via the received view is explained in a manner consistent with the ideas of materialism, determinism, and so forth. Human action, for example, will be viewed as simple matter in motion — that is, as purely biological machinations operating in accordance with natural phenomena such as action potential, reinforcement contingency, and sensorimotor habit (e.g., Hebb, 1974; Kimble, 1995). Questions concerning these biological machinations thereafter become essential to psychological investigation; psychologists inquire not into whether they exist, but rather into the particular dynamics of these putative psychological realities. This can be seen clearly in psychology's traditional emphasis on overt behavior, and its more recent emphasis on the material (i.e., neural) "substrata" of psychological phenomena (e.g., Churchland, 1986; Gazzaniga, 1995; Hebb, 1974; Tooby and Cosmides, 1990). On the other hand, mental phenomena, agency, or spirituality — which are not consistent with the background assumptions described here — are categorically rejected from received view-style accounts. On the few occasions when these concepts are brought into psychological explanation they are altered or marginalized in such a way that they lose their unique identity and meaning (see, for example, Crick [1994]; cf. Rychlak, 1981, pp. 519–538; 1984).

The assumptions of the received view of science can be contrasted with other historical methods such as phenomenology (Giorgi, 1970; Husserl, 1913/1962), introspection (Titchener, 1915), Q-sort (Stephenson, 1953), or anthropological phenomenology (van Kaam, 1966) — all of which produce results that are incompatible with those of the received view of science. For instance, if researchers adopted the phenomenological method for investigating human mentation, then they would find themselves committed to a unique set of background assumptions — viz., the existence of essential structures consisting in a self-existent mind, the notion that such a mind has access to pure experience, and the notion that apodictic knowledge regarding

such pure experience is obtainable. Phenomenology as a method presumes these assumptions to be true at the outset. Results of the phenomenological method, in contrast to the received view of science, provide descriptive analyses of essential structures of experience, and provide insight into the dynamics of mental phenomena qua mental phenomena (e.g., Giorgi, 1970; Polkinghorne, 1983).

William James too perceived the incompatibility of different truth claims or background assumptions. For instance, James argued that the idea of a closed, materialistic universe — upon which the received view of science is based — was fundamentally incompatible with the idea of an open universe that allows for human agency (1897/1956). When we use a method that comes bound to a closed, materialistic universe (such as the received view), we rule out the possibility of formulating agentive accounts of human action. James articulated this well when he declared that determinism and agency belong in two different universes — with determinism belonging to a universe which

professes that those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be. The future has no ambiguous possibilities hidden in its womb: the part we call the present is compatible with only one totality. Any other future complement than the one fixed from eternity is impossible. (1897/1956, p. 150)

and agency belonging to a universe wherein

The parts have a certain amount of loose play on one another, so that the laying down of one of them does not necessarily determine what the others shall be. It admits that possibilities may be in excess of actualities, and that things not yet revealed to our knowledge may in themselves be ambiguous. (p. 150)

In similar fashion, James argued that the assumptions of the received view were incompatible with the truth claims of religion and spirituality in general (James, 1902/1929, pp. 481–485; 1907/1978, pp. 47–55). When we affirm the received view of science, we rule out the possibility of formulating spiritualistic accounts.

Contemporaneously, we see that the tension between various methodological approaches has increased, keeping intact this distinction between the received scientific method, phenomenological or humanistic alternatives, and still other formulations of science (e.g., Harre 1970; Lakatos, 1970; Manicas and Secord, 1983; van Fraasen, 1980). Kimble's (1984) analysis of the "two cultures" of psychology well illustrates such distinctions, and suggests that while many psychologists yet subscribe to the received view of science (and its attendant assumptions), a substantial number of psychologists subscribe to humanistic assumptions regarding the nature of human action and mental life, and thus affirm phenomenological or humanistic-

style methods.⁴ Indeed, the incompatibility of these rival camps seems profound, in that their differences occur at the most fundamental level — with, for example, disputes occurring over such basic notions as atomism vs. holism, objectivity vs. subjectivity, and determinism vs. indeterminism. This incompatibility has suggested to many that these two positions — as well as the accounts that issue therefrom — are irreconcilable in principle (cf. Furedy and Furedy, 1982; Giorgi, 1970; Kimble, 1984).

Theoretical Coherence

We return, then, to the challenge of methodological pluralism. As has been illustrated in the literature, tensions between different methodological camps exist, suggesting that no integration of incompatible knowledge claims or accounts is forthcoming. This tension is exacerbated by the fact that many psychologists — such as classical psychoanalysts and Piagetian scholars — do not fit squarely into either of these camps. Given this theoretical and methodological disunity, how can the challenge of methodological pluralism be met? That is, how can methods that are informed by incompatible truth claims, and thus which produce incompatible accounts, collectively provide an integrated picture of psychological reality?

Though James was an avowedly pluralistic thinker on most issues, he recognized the value of *coherence*. According to James, any theoretical system that aims to lead successfully through experience — fostering consistency, stability, and some pre-established higher moral good — must be formulated in a coherent fashion (e.g., James, 1907/1978, pp. 42–44; cf. Gardner, 1992). This means that the various components of the theoretical system, including the background assumptions, should cohere: the components should fit together and work cooperatively rather than antagonistically. The various aspects of the system should offer converging accounts of reality, and the consequences of these aspects should lead in similar directions. If stability and the higher moral good are upheld as desiderata, then each component of the theoretical system should ultimately lead toward these goals.

James's call for coherence is a call for a common methodological starting point in psychology. Such a starting point would include a unified (though loosely defined) set of assumptions or truth claims that inform the methods

⁴Not all humanistic psychologists reject an experimental approach however. Rychlak, for example, espouses a psychology of "rigorous humanism" which parts ways with the received view of science, but still calls for the systematic, empirical testing of hypothetical statements. Rychlak claims that his reformulation (or resuscitation) of the scientific method should allow any falsifiable hypothesis, teleological or otherwise, to be tested. In this way, Rychlak's reformulation offers yet another methodological strategy for research psychologists. (See Rychlak [1988] for a thorough discussion of this alternative.)

of psychology, as well as rules that guide the selection and use of various investigative approaches. With coherence established, psychologists would be provided a common, though perhaps contextual and evolving, starting point for psychological research — a starting point that would allow for compatible accounts to be rendered by diverse psychologists. Any method for psychological investigation that did not cohere with the adopted starting point, on the other hand, would warrant reformulation or rejection.

Would we risk losing truth by pursuing coherence — that is, by pursuing a common methodological starting point for psychological research? We would if “discovery” were at stake in the application of our methods. In light of the foregoing discussion on method, however — which illustrates that background assumptions are committed to during the formation of the method, and that subsequent accounts offered by that method are reflections of those assumptions — we see that discovery is *not* at stake in the application of our methods. Because implicit background assumptions are unavoidable in any investigation (as we formulate a research question, select a method, and so forth), the assumptions to which we commit should be critically examined for their coherence and satisfactoriness at the outset. Moreover, it is crucial that these assumptions be explicit, consciously chosen, and subject to continual re-examination.

Weak and Strong Coherence

But how coherent should psychology be? At what level should theoretical coherence obtain? Distinguishing between two kinds of coherence — referred to here as *weak* and *strong* — provides a framework for answering these questions. Though the criteria of weak and strong coherence (as defined below) have not *both* been traditionally satisfied, they together provide guidelines for a pluralistic — yet essentially unified — psychology.

Weak coherence demands that psychologists involved in pluralistic research programs employ theories and methods that work cooperatively rather than antagonistically. The background assumptions that inform each method should be theoretically consistent with the background assumptions of the other methods. This requires that the methods employed rest on a similar theoretical base, and converge on a single — though perhaps manifold — picture of psychological life. Satisfying the requirement of weak coherence might be difficult for a research program that is not carefully constructed; but such coherence is vital in any event, for without it researchers employ methods that are based on incompatible background assumptions, and thus that produce inconsistent, self-refuting accounts. The simultaneous use of such methods constitutes an impediment to the integrated picture called for by methodological pluralists.

Satisfying the need for coherence within a research program, however, does not address the need for strong coherence, or coherence that occurs across the discipline. Not only are incompatible accounts possible within a methodologically plural psychology, but also are different ways of evaluating such accounts. A psychology that possesses no overarching rules for evaluation shades into epistemic relativism, where there can be no way of justifying potential contributions to the discipline as a whole. According to one set of theorists, this lack of overarching rules ushers in a situation where, "different groups of researchers adopt only internal rules and standards appropriate to their paradigms of choice," thereby creating confusion over "how to adjudicate the work of other researchers from a different persuasion" (Hoshmand and Martin, 1994, p. 172). Such epistemic relativism is considered problematic because it precludes unity or systematicity in scientific (or practical) progress. These theorists correctly state that:

This is a problem for journal editors and reviewers as well as those who encounter barriers in submitting their work to journals dominated by research from a particular paradigm. Such a state of affairs would seem to prevent a viable methodological pluralism and constructive dialogue about what may constitute progress in psychological science. (Hoshmand and Martin, 1994, p. 172)

Moreover, many psychologists are concerned that such specialization and insularity will eventually result in the dissolution of psychology (e.g., Gardner, 1992; Scott, 1991; Slife and Williams, 1997; Spence, 1987; Sternberg, 1992; cf. Yanchar and Slife, 1997). Such dissolution occurs as communities of scientists become increasingly idiosyncratic, break away from psychology proper, and merge with other scholarly disciplines. For example, Spence says:

In my worst nightmares I foresee a decimation of institutional psychology as we know it. Human experimental psychologists desert to the emerging discipline of cognitive science; physiological psychologists go happily to departments of biology and neuroscience; industrial/organizational psychologists are snapped up by business schools; and psychopathologists find their home in medical schools. (1987, p. 1053)

Not all psychologists agree that such specialization and insularity bodes ill for the future of psychology (e.g., Bower, 1993), however many authors suggest that at least some form of unity should emerge within a methodologically plural psychology (cf. Yanchar and Slife, 1997) — even if that unity results from a few guiding principles that provide order in the evaluation and accumulation of knowledge claims (Giorgi, 1985; Hoshmand and Martin, 1994; Slife and Williams, 1995; Yanchar and Kristensen, 1996).

What Kind of Methodological Pluralism?

I have argued that coherence — via a common theoretical starting point — should inform methodological pluralism in psychology. Developing a coherent methodology opens the possibility that compatible accounts will be produced through the use of different investigative approaches. Integration of various findings might then occur, since each research program would share a common theoretical starting point. Methodological pluralism of this sort has a distinct character. It does not permit an “anything goes” approach to psychological research (in the sense of eclecticism [see Slife and Williams, 1995, p. 204]), and it does not catalyze further fragmentation of the discipline. But such methodological pluralism does allow for various investigative approaches to be employed and engenders diversity in the research activities of psychologists.

It is likely that the theoretical reformulation of some traditional methods would be necessary before a methodological pluralism for psychology — which accommodates many potentially useful methods — could be made coherent. This means that the background assumptions which inform various methods would need to be examined, and perhaps be reformulated, if they do not cohere with the philosophical starting point of the discipline in general. The outward appearance of a theoretically reformulated method might remain unchanged, but the background assumptions of the method, and the nature of its target subject matter, would be significantly altered.

Relatedly, a coherent methodological pluralism would demand the formulation of an indigenous epistemology that accommodates plural (though theoretically coherent) investigative approaches (Hoshmand and Martin, 1994; Koch, 1959; Polkinghorne, 1983). An indigenous epistemology would render evaluations, based on a common set of criteria, for accounts offered by all or most psychologists. Though such an epistemology could arbitrate among accounts or theoretical claims, it need not be totalizing and stultifying. For example, an epistemology that recognized distinct levels of psychological life (e.g., biological, sociological, teleological) could be established, provided that none of these levels was reducible to another (Hyland, 1985; Rychlak, 1993), and provided that these levels could be woven into a coherent account that recognized their complementarity.⁵ An epistemology of this sort would dramatically increase the likelihood that the discipline remains uni-

⁵Though complementary levels of psychological life are irreducible, they may be brought under a coherent theoretical framework that avoids contradiction. For example, embodiment and social context do not necessarily preclude human agency. The writings of Merleau-Ponty (1963), Rychlak (1994, pp. 224–251), Penfield (1975), and Williams (1992) help clarify this argument.

fied, and would open the possibility that many areas of psychology be investigated with the appropriate methods. Indeed, many contemporary theorists are confident that such an epistemology can be developed (e.g., Fishman, 1987; Giorgi, 1985; Hoshmand and Martin, 1994; Staats, 1991), though some argue that the development of a suitable epistemology will not be possible without careful theoretical consideration (Giorgi, 1985; Yanchar and Kristensen, 1996).

Two primary questions which lie at the heart of this theoretical consideration involve the background assumptions to which psychologists should commit. The first question asks: What assumptions provide an appropriate starting point for psychological investigation? For example, should psychologists commit to a material universe that is fundamentally closed and determinant, thereby disallowing the possibility that human agents introduce novelty into the universe (i.e., disallowing human teleology)? Or should psychologists commit to a universe that is fundamentally open, allowing for the possibility of human agency? In either case, the methods chosen (and the results of those methods) would reflect the background assumptions adopted.

The second question asks: What shall count as rigorous and legitimate psychological research? — and by extension: With what standard shall we adjudicate findings that result from the use of different methods? These questions must be addressed, not only for an indigenous epistemology to be established, but also for the fragmentation which threatens the discipline to be arrested. This question's importance derives from the fact that some rules must be established for adjudicating psychological work. An uncritical "anything goes" policy amounts to the claim that all psychological formulations are true or are in some sense equal. To make such a claim, however, is to trivialize the ideas in question; for the uncritical acceptance of *all* ideas allows no single idea to be taken seriously. Moreover, to make such a relativistic claim is to exacerbate the fragmentation already existing within the discipline.

Can these crucial questions be answered? Critical examinations of the assumptions of contemporary psychology, which attempt to set guidelines for acceptable psychological theory and research, have been performed (Kukla, 1989, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1983; Robinson, 1985; Slife and Williams, 1995). Given this literature, it appears that the work necessary to achieve an indigenous epistemology, and ultimately, theoretical coherence, is manageable. As of yet, however, little agreement regarding the theoretical direction of psychology has occurred (Hoshmand and Martin, 1994). Indeed, there may be as many theoretical or methodological starting points as there are psychologists. Looking to James for guidance in this disunified state of affairs, we see that practical human experience might be a suitable starting point for answering these crucial questions. In this case, epistemological and ontological commitments for psychology would be traced to their practical connec-

tion with our lives. As James said, "Grant an idea or belief to be true, what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual life?" (1907/1978, p. 97). Thus, in formulating a theoretical starting point for psychology we can (and perhaps must) turn our attention to the theoretical costs, i.e., consequences, of potential starting points (cf. Slife and Williams, 1995). If the cost of any theoretical commitment is too great for practical and moral human interests, then that commitment should be rejected. For example, if the consequences of determinism (viz., unavoidable error, fatalistic inaction, pernicious pessimism, loss of personal responsibility, and nihilism [see James, 1897/1956, 1907/1978, pp. 45-62]) are too problematic or burdensome, then determinism should not be taken seriously as a theoretical starting point for psychological research.

For now, it is unclear whether these questions can be answered. In any event, it is important to continue the critical examination of psychology. Although a critical stance toward theories and methods will not single-handedly generate theoretical coherence, it will assist in the establishment of a suitable starting point for rendering evaluations, and provide a basis for further discussion regarding the methodology of psychological research. Adopting such a starting point is the first step in founding a coherent methodological pluralism — particularly in a discipline that is already underway.

A Final Note

It is possible that the methodological pluralism herein advocated, which demands both weak and strong coherence, is not consistent with other varieties of methodological pluralism put forth in the literature. Indeed, it might be the case that such a methodological pluralism runs counter to the kinds of methodological pluralism currently advanced. Though the requirements of weak and strong coherence do not necessarily demand an atemporal foundation for knowledge, they oppose a radical "anything goes" approach to psychological practice, and thus might (to some) look more like a disguised foundationalism than genuine plurality. It is difficult to know, however, since many discussions of methodological pluralism do not address underlying issues such as strong and weak coherence. Other commentators might not view a disunified psychology as problematic in the first place (e.g., Viney, 1996), and thus would probably not be concerned with strong coherence (though weak coherence would still be a relevant concern [e.g., Kukla, 1989]). Still others actively encourage a divorce between historically irreconcilable theoretical orientations in psychology (e.g., Fraley and Vargas, 1986; Kendler, 1985). For these theorists, the requirement of strong coherence would likely be irrelevant to the formulation of legitimate knowledge, as well as to the advancement of science in general.

But to theorists who are interested in a unified starting point for psychological practice — coupled with flexibility and the possibility of multiple investigative methods — the issue of theoretical coherence cannot be ignored. In this sense, it is incumbent upon such theorists to begin a conversation that clarifies and advances the need for such coherence. Even if a coherent methodological pluralism ultimately proves unobtainable, however, questions pertaining to the fundamental theoretical assumptions that inform the discipline must be taken seriously. The answers we generate to these questions will determine the kinds of accounts we render, as well as the eventual nature of psychology as a scholarly undertaking, whether psychology be a monistic or a pluralistic discipline.

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