

## Pluralism: An Antidote for Fanaticism, the Delusion of Our Age

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William James's pluralism, when combined with his pragmatism and radical empiricism, is a complete and coherent philosophy of life. James provides an antidote to the excesses of both the extreme realist/objectivist and the extreme constructivist/relativist camps. In this paper, we demonstrate how this is so in a discussion of epistemology and ontology including several extended examples. These examples demonstrate the inescapability of context and background assumptions and the advantages of a pluralist worldview.

A suicide bomber on a bus sweats as he passes the last seconds of the lives of everyone on that bus. All will die because of a lack of pluralism. The bomber can only think of his hatred for the West or the paradise that awaits him. If he were a pluralist he would think (along with William James), "How goes it for the rest of the universe if I end our lives in this manner?" Concretely, he might ask, "What if God's name is Jesus not Allah?" "What if the concept of God is a delusion?" "What if I'd been born to Shiiah parents instead of Sunni parents?" "Perhaps my leader was furthering his own interests when he called this holy Jihad?" "What does this do for all the other people on the bus?" "What about their loved ones?" "What about my loved ones — might my enemies learn my name and visit revenge on my family?" And with that the bomber pulls out the wire which disarms the bomb. The group of fellow travelers does not know how close they came to death.

Except he will not disarm the bomb because he is a fanatic and not a pluralist. He can only live his last moments thinking about hate or paradise. We should note that our definition of fanaticism here is largely cognitively based. That is to

say, the judgment of what is or is not fanaticism can be made based on certain ideological beliefs and cognitive assumptions but there are many other personal, emotional, political, and other contextual considerations when evaluating fanaticism. Though we will focus on just the cognitive approach here, a similar analysis could be made looking at emotions, family relationships, political actions, etc.

Pluralism, when combined with pragmatism and radical empiricism, is a complete and coherent philosophy of life which can serve as an antidote to currently dominant objectivist, "mirror of nature" philosophies of science. James's philosophy is perfectly suited for the ontological debate in psychology because it tames the excesses of extreme realist and extreme constructivist sides. As a founding father, James gives psychologists the foundation for a constructive–realist philosophy of life.

We believe that a fundamental human problem is that most people find it uncomfortable to admit to and to live with uncertainty. From a pluralist perspective, what we can know and how we should act are forever uncertain. However, it is very unsatisfying to say that one does not know the "right" answer to almost everything. Since one's perspective plays a role in the creation of whatever truth one believes, there can be no assumption-free truths. We might have as many possible "truths" as we have perspectives. That complicates knowledge and life tremendously.

However, every pluralist knows that living in a pluralistic universe is not nearly as difficult or complex as that last paragraph suggests. One arrives at his or her own "truth" by examination of any choice from multiple perspectives — although "plural" can mean as few as two. If there is good agreement among multiple perspectives on an answer, one feels confident enough to accept that answer tentatively. It should be noted that this type of truth cannot be said to be objective, even if it is widely agreed upon. From this perspective, truth can be agreed upon intersubjectively, but never from a frame of reference that lacks assumptions and biases. Once a pluralistic truth is in place, the pragmatic (*à la* James) utility will determine the answer's place in the pluralist/pragmatist's approach to life. In this case, utility is determined by coherence and functionality within social communities as the communities themselves unfold and transform. However, it is the temperament of the pluralist to always be on the lookout for new or alternative perspectives that might shed a new light on the issue and perhaps challenge the wisdom of a previously accepted answer.

For one who yearns for the quiet security that possession of a contextless truth offers, the never-ending uncertainty of pluralism represents a living hell. So, in all likelihood, our bomber will continue to ponder his hatred for the West until he can think no more. Conversely, after disarming his bomb, the pluralist has the "blooming buzzing confusion" of our multifaceted social, psychological reality to ponder as he continues to struggle toward his truth.

### An Exercise in Intellectual Humility

One of the great insights of contemporary scholarship is the perspectival nature of all knowledge claims. That is, one cannot begin to make a knowledge claim without first making some fundamental, background assumptions (Howard, 2003). These background assumptions are nested in the paradigm that grounds one's thinking. Kuhn (1971) wrote not only about different scientific paradigms, but paradigms govern our thinking in all domains (e.g., in economics, one can contrast free market approaches with "Buddhist economics" [see Schumacher, 1973, Ch. 4]; in politics one can compare communist approaches with fascist perspectives; in spirituality one can contrast Christian with New Age perspectives; and so forth). Most knowledge claims accept a particular worldview as if all of its assumptions were literally true. This strategy enables people to assert and compare knowledge claims with similar background assumptions — but such claims are no better than the assumptions upon which they are built. Thus, scholarship cannot produce unvarnished truths but yields perspectival knowledge claims. Therefore, from the perspectivalist point of view, all truth claims are dependent and tentative. Perspectivalists can acknowledge this by qualifying an assertion with an explicit identification of the perspective from which the claim is true, e.g., for an Einsteinian physicist, free market economists believe, believers in liberal democratic values hold, and so forth.

Unfortunately, most of us forget how dependent our own knowledge claims are on the assumptions within our worldviews. Thus, teachers constantly remind students how different the world looks from perspectives that are different from these students' habitual vision of reality. This is easily accomplished by noting how radically reality shifts when it is viewed through the lens of a different perspective. For example, how would an atheist view the ten commandments? How would a communist react to the role that lobbyists play in United States policy formation? How would a Buddhist economist evaluate the practice of corporate downsizing? Dogmatic thinkers miss the more basic point in this exercise on changing perspectives by blithely asserting that the alternative perspectives (that we just suggested) are simply wrong.

Modernist thinkers are generally unimpressed initially with philosophical arguments and thought experiments about the importance of background assumptions in the "reality" they have created through their web of beliefs. After all, from a strictly empirical point of view, reality is approached by examining "just the facts." In other words, our interpretations ought only be "the data" summarized and in word form. If this is true then what need is there for a discussion of assumptions? Though they may not realize it, modernists have an almost unshakable belief in a worldview that can be used to dramatize the role that background assumptions play in creating one's "reality." This belief system is found in the apparently objective world of mathematics, which modernists

use as their language of choice (Slife and Williams, 1995). Show them the numbers, they seem to say, and it will compel their belief. Thus, our challenge in the next section is to present modernist thinkers with some mathematical examples that will highlight certain problems with their assumptive world-views. If we can accomplish this task, we might entice modernists to think about the formative role that background assumptions play in creating *all* knowledge claims. Understanding the importance of assumptions in knowledge claims is the key to understanding the value of Jamesian pluralism.

*Games of Chance, Magical Pennies, Savings, Debt, and Assumptions*

As you know, a die has the numbers 1 through 6 on each of its six sides. Below, we've represented four distinct die by listing their values. As you can see, we have altered the values on the six sides of four dice. For example, die A has a value of "5" on three sides and a value of "1" on each of the other three sides; die B has "3" on each side, et cetera.

Die A	Die B	Die C	Die D
1	3	6	0
1	3	6	0
1	3	2	4
5	3	2	4
5	3	2	4
5	3	2	4

Imagine a contest between two people, in which each will roll one of the dice and see who rolls the higher number. The first one to win five rolls gets a dollar. Which die would you select? Do not read any further until you have decided which die you would stake your hard-earned cash on.

Rest assured that if you understand its background assumptions, you need never lose a cent playing this "game of chance." Generally, by the time your opponents surrender, they will be anxious to know what it is about probability theory that they don't yet understand. To their surprise, it has nothing at all to do with probabilities, but everything to do with background assumptions.

As has been shown, no matter which die you select, we can select one that will beat you the majority of the time (Howard, 2003). To see for yourself, start with die B (all 3s) and compare it with die D (4s and 0s). Since die B always yields a 3, and die D delivers a 4 on 66% of the rolls, then die D generally beats die B. Thus, we can state that  $B < D$ . Can we find any die that is superior to die D? Well, die A (5s and 1s) is superior to die D. Half the time die A yields a value of 5 — which always beats die D's 4s and 0s. And even when die A yields a value of 1 (half the time), it still beats die D's 0s. Thus, A is superior

to D, and we can now say that  $B < D < A$ . Can we find a die to beat die A? Die C (6s and 2s) always beats die A whenever die A comes up as "1" (half the time). And when die A comes up as "5" (half the time) it still loses to die C's 6's. Thus, die C is superior to die A, and we now know that  $B < D < A < C$ ! So we have now proven that die C is the best die — haven't we? Yes we have — if and only if probabilities follow the transitive law! This is where the importance of background assumptions is dramatically highlighted.

The transitive law dictates that if you (Y) weigh less than your father (F), and your father weighs less than us (US), and we weigh less than a giant football player (FP), then we can state that  $Y < F < US < FP$ . The transitive law states that you can safely conclude that you weigh less than a giant football player. This conclusion is warranted because the transitive law holds for weights. Is the transitive law also a valid assumption in the domain of probabilities?

If the transitive law holds for probabilities, then since  $B < D < A < C$ , one could safely conclude that  $B < C$ . Since Sancho Panza declared that "the proof of the pudding is in the eating of it," let's take his epistemological recommendation and compare die B with die C. Die B always produces a "3" whereas die C produces a "2" on 66% of the throws. Thus,  $B > C$ , which is the *opposite* of what the transitive law holds. Thus, in the dice exercise, we tend to be fooled by a set of nontransitive dice. No matter which die is chosen, there is always a die which can beat it.

Those who assume that the transitive law holds for probabilities believe there must be a "best" die to be found. It turns out that the search for the best die is a ghost hunt. The ironic part is that many players assume transitivity without even knowing what it is — let alone that they are wagering their money on the law's appropriateness for this particular "game of chance." This exercise highlights our point about background assumptions. Because the players were unaware of the assumption they were making, it was impossible to look for alternative assumptions. By informing a dice player of the assumption of transitivity, we make that player immediately aware of an alternative assumption. There is no "best die" but the best die depends on the context in which it is chosen.

Another mathematical example serves to illustrate the power of unrecognized assumptions in a more practical way. In the lead author's "Psychology of Healthy Lifestyles" course he tries to help students to make a connection between how their present daily acts will inexorably lead to their lives' destinies. The day-to-day decisions to drink (or not to drink) large quantities of alcohol over time can produce either a healthy or an unhealthy relationship with distilled spirits. Similarly, conscientiously developed and practiced study habits generally lead to scholastic success — or failure. Where do small differences in habits of spending versus saving lead? Consider the following example in which we demonstrate the power of background assumptions.

Small differences in saving or spending can result in dramatic differences at retirement. Imagine two identical married couples who differ only in the

amount of their paycheck they spend on non-assets each month. One couple spends 85% of their post-tax income on non-assets, the other spends 95%. This saving/spending habit is consistent from the moment they start working at college graduation throughout their 43 year working careers. They start work after school with an identical amount of student loan and other debt, they secure average jobs, pay an average amount of taxes, and so forth. The two couples live identical lives with the exception that one saves 5% and one saves 15% of their discretionary income. Using real data with regard to starting salary and debt, it has been shown that it is possible for the 5% couple to retire with a monthly debt payment of \$30,000 without reducing total indebtedness and the 15% couple to retire with over \$300,000 in interest each month without touching their savings (see Howard, 2003 for further details). In other words, the couple that saved 5% each year must immediately declare bankruptcy upon retirement and the couple that saved 15% can comfortably retire and leave a generous inheritance.

Most students do not predict such a dramatic difference between the two couples. The same, non-intuitive principle can be shown with a well-known brief mathematical example which serves to illustrate the point of the importance of background assumptions. Please answer each of the three questions below. Which of the following choices would you take in each case?

- A) A penny that doubled tax deferred every day for a week, or one million dollars?
- B) A penny that doubled tax deferred every day for a month, or one million dollars?
- C) A penny that doubled tax deferred every day for a year, or one million dollars?

Few people take the doubling penny for a week — as seven time blocks is clearly a short-term proposition. In fact, starting with one penny on day one, the doubling penny is worth only \$0.64 after seven days (or six doubles). Conversely, intuition usually suggests that a penny that doubles 364 times (choice C) would be quite valuable indeed. It is question B (an investment that compounds 30 times) that seems to produce a split in college students' intuitions (about half take the doubling penny, the other half take the million dollars). At the end of the second week the compounding penny rises in value from \$0.64 to \$81.92. At the end of the third week the penny is worth \$10,486.00, and it grows to \$1,342,177 by the end of week 4. So the doubling penny wins after four weeks. But the typical month is slightly longer than four weeks — it's 31 days. The extra 3 days are important to note because they make a difference of about \$9.5 million (\$10,737,418 versus \$1,342,177)!

What is wrong with our intuition when many of us select \$1,000,000 instead of the \$10,737,418 option (the penny that doubles every day for a 31-day month)? We assume we are dealing with a linear progression when, in fact,

untaxed, compound interest and debt both grow exponentially. Our intuitions are badly deceived. This is the same problem that the students faced when deciding the difference between habitually saving 5% and saving 15%.

The point is that background assumptions catch many of us unaware. In this case, the predictions of exponential functions differ dramatically from predictions that assume linearity. Many people assume — without knowing they are assuming — that linear and exponential functions are roughly equivalent. Thus, late in the games of such exponential functions as compounding debt, untaxed compounding interest, global population, and the like, people are likely to be stunned at how quickly the numbers at stake will increase.

Our beliefs, knowledge claims, interpretations, rules of thumb and so forth are only as good as the many background assumptions that undergird our efforts to make sense of the world we inhabit. Donald Campbell (1974) concretized this reality for research scientists in his doubt-to-trust ratio. In order to assert any knowledge claim, we are dependent upon numerous background assumptions that we often trust implicitly. When the assumptions are wrong, our knowledge claims ring hollow.

Perhaps William James's philosophy of pluralism (see *A Pluralistic Universe*, 1909) was the first sustained philosophical treatment within psychology of the role that one's perspective plays in the creation of the reality that one experiences. James's vision suggests that we ought to be very humble about our beliefs, views, knowledge, etc. This is true because the world we experience can shift radically when viewed from a different perspective. As in many of the examples cited above, we are often unaware of the assumptions inherent in our perspectives and intuitions. All seekers of wisdom should strive for an appropriate level of humility, as it is so easy to fall under the spell cast by our regnant belief systems.

### *A Final Look at Fanaticism*

Jamesian pluralism is an alternative not only to the extreme realist but to the extreme relativist as well. James seems to be agnostic with regard to the nature of reality and avoids the realist/constructivist dichotomy by taking a pragmatic position. In this way, Jamesian pluralism is relative with regard to epistemology but not necessarily with regard to ontology. By relative with regard to epistemology, we mean that from a Jamesian perspective, there are many possible methods to get at truth but no one method is consistently or demonstrably the best. Therefore, from this perspective, using multiple methods is the most useful strategy. By claiming that James was agnostic about ontology we mean that James did not have a strong commitment to either a realist or a non-realist position with regard to reality and our perceptions thereof. This agnosticism served to help him avoid several philosophical pitfalls.

Though pluralists have at times been accused of simply being relativists, pluralism can actually be useful for avoiding some problems of relativism. One such

problem is the self-defeating nature of relativism. The relativist states that all truth claims are relative and that absolute truth claims are not to be trusted. But paradoxically, this is an absolute truth claim itself. Why should this absolute truth be trusted and all others rejected? This is a common criticism of relativism. Similar to the relativist and realist, the pragmatic pluralist also makes truth claims. However, these claims are perpetually provisional, never absolute. As James wrote "Compromise and mediation are inseparable from the pluralistic philosophy. Only monistic dogmatism can say of any of its hypotheses, 'It is either that or nothing; take it or leave it just as it stands'" (1907, p. 313). Pluralist philosophy does not dogmatically insist that it must be accepted prior to investigation. In fact, the pluralist may even go as far as to question the need of pluralist philosophy itself and to consider other alternatives, such as monist approaches. Ongoing openness to alternative possibilities, perspectives, and assumptions characterizes the pluralist position.

Another problem shared by relativists but not pluralists involves moral decision making. Returning to our example at the beginning of this article, the extreme relativist has no moral grounds on which to critique the suicide bomber. The suicide bomber is merely living truthfully as he understands truth, no better or worse than any other possible life he might have lived. The inability to distinguish between moral rights and wrongs gives rise to moral nihilism. In contrast, James does not endorse strict value-neutrality, merely the consideration of multiple perspectives with an emphasis on pragmatism as a guiding value. In this way, James leaves open the possibility that correct moral judgments can be made in specific contexts.

All knowledge is dependent upon background assumptions — even the mathematics demonstrated earlier. Is  $10 + 10$  equal to 20? Yes, if you are in a base 10 world. If you are in a binary world, then  $10 + 10 = 100$ . So all knowledge is perspectival. But this should not be taken to imply that there are no local, useful truths (or lower case Ts). In our ordinary lives,  $10 + 10$  does equal 20. However, one should not give in to the urge to become fanatical and state something like  $10 + 10$  must always equal 20.

Far better for each of us to ignore the urge to believe in assumption-free Absolute Truths. The best one can have is truth in a particular context, or truth from within my community and my perspective. We, with James, recognize that all truth claims have background assumptions and exist within communities of practice. Still, James shows us that other perspectives yield different (often equally defensible) truths. For example, there is a Catholic god, a Muslim god, a Zoroastrian god, and many others. Which of these perspectives ought one adopt? Now we must enter another of James's insights. Since one cannot believe in everything, pluralists must choose among competing truth claims. Now we enter the domain of pragmatism (James, 1907).



Upon completing a lecture on Pragmatism at Berkeley, William James was offered a glass of water as he answered questions from the audience. The story claims James was asked a question about how broadly or narrowly to construe his pragmatic criterion of truth. James held up the glass and rhetorically asked, "How goes it for the rest of the universe if I slake my thirst in this manner?" After a pause, he drank the water. The story illustrates the importance of considering the real impact of one's choices from multiple perspectives before acting. By continually asking "How goes this for the rest of the universe?" one is able to consider the perspectives of all those who might be affected by the choice. Some choices will have minimal impact on the rest of the universe, even after considering many perspectives. This type of consideration is a pragmatic and pluralist method of engagement.

Obviously, if James stood in the footwear department of Wal-Mart and considered a pair of sneakers made by underpaid workers in southeast Asia, he could ask, "How goes it for the rest of the universe if I choose these sneakers to protect my feet?" This is a much more troubling question to answer and we do not know how James would respond. But whether or not he purchases the sneakers, we should all rejoice in his decision as it would have been made after consideration of the widest set of perspectives available to him. James pursued his truth, as each person must likewise do. Making universal claims of a favored truth (like "It is an Absolute Truth" or "It is part of Natural Law," etc.) is an extraordinarily dangerous move. It is a move we should all be loathe to make.

Funny, we have not yet heard the explosion of the fanatic's bomb on the bus. Perhaps he got past his rage. Perhaps he is now weighing the outcome of his actions from a broad range of perspectives. Perhaps he sees that his acts look evil from virtually every perspective but his own. Perhaps the rest of the universe is trying to tell him something. Perhaps there is an antidote to fanaticism. One can only hope.

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