

A Pluralistic Universe: An Overview and Implications for Psychology

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This article describes some historical precursors that led to William James's participation in the Hibbert Lectures and his subsequent publication of *A Pluralistic Universe*. William James viewed the monism–pluralism issue as the greatest issue the human mind can frame, and he returned to this issue again and again in his psychological and philosophical works. The Hibbert Lectures afforded an opportunity to explore the problem of monism and pluralism in a broadly religious or spiritual context. We describe James's logical and experiential attacks on monistic thinkers, his seemingly paradoxical introduction of Gustav Fechner's panpsychism to English-speaking philosophers, and his spirited defense of pluralism. We conclude by discussing the relevance of James's pluralism for current questions of unification in psychology.

The centennial of the publication of William James's classic treatise *A Pluralistic Universe* affords opportunities to revisit the tensions between monistic and pluralistic world views along with the closely related problem of unity and disunity in the sciences and other academic disciplines. The continuing relevance of James's work on the one and the many is illustrated in current debates on the theoretical feasibility as well as the utility of unification vs. pluralism in science and in psychology in particular.

James's treatise, *A Pluralistic Universe*, grew out of eight lectures he delivered at Manchester College of Oxford University between May 4 and May 28, 1908. In this paper, we open with a brief historical overview of the Hibbert lecture series along with a summary of the goals for which the lectures were established.

We then turn to substantive issues including a review of James's critique of monistic world views and the related problems of absolutism and intellectualism along with his defense of pluralism. We argue that, although he was reluctantly open to the theoretical possibility of a world completely unified, he was nevertheless philosophically and temperamentally a pluralist. Finally, we discuss the continuing relevance of James's pluralism for psychology and other sciences with special reference to current debates on the problems of unification.

The Hibbert Lectures

Funding for the Hibbert Lectures at Oxford University was provided in a trust established by Robert Hibbert, a Unitarian. The inaugural lecture was delivered in 1878 by the philologist Friedrich Max Müller, one of the pioneers in comparative religion and possibly the leading authority of his day on the religions of India (Müller, 1878/2004). Over the years, the Hibbert Lectures attracted some of the most respected leaders in philosophy, theology, and religion, including people such as William James, Josiah Royce, Albert Schweitzer, William Hocking, and more recently Karen Armstrong (Hibbert Trust, 2009). With the sanction and support of the Hibbert Trustees, *The Hibbert Journal* was established 20 years after the inaugural Hibbert lectures by Müller. The editors, Lawrence P. Jacks and G. Dawes Hicks (1902), in an editorial in the first issue, noted that the mission of the journal was not to "dead forms of religious thought" but to "thought which lives and moves" (p. 1). They noted further that the sympathies of the journal are not with fixed religious ideas but with those in the faith community who see "theology [as] a process akin to evolution in nature" (p. 4). The journal editors welcomed controversy and the vigorous exchange of new ideas in theology and philosophy.

Skrupskelis (2003) noted that on November 10, 1907, a letter was forwarded from Lawrence P. Jacks on behalf of the Hibbert Trustees inquiring about James's possible interest in participating in the lecture series. By 1907 the lecture series was highly successful so an invitation to participate amounted to significant recognition of James's growing international prestige. Nevertheless, James was initially hesitant, complaining in a January 4, 1908 letter addressed to his friend F.C.S. Schiller that he hated lecturing and that another lecture series would result in still another book written in the popular style. He noted that *Pragmatism* had been written in an overly popular style and that the style had made him many enemies (James, 1908a). James was caught in a continuing battle between the demands created by his popularity with the public and his wish to write carefully reasoned scholarly pieces for the academic community. In a January 27, 1908 letter to Schiller, James expressed doubts about his ability to work on the lectures. He complained of angina, a succession of colds, of "great depression of strength," and of "interminable convalescences" (James, 1908b). He noted that his debilitating health issues prevented him from even thinking about the lectures.

In view of James's health issues and his reservations about another popular lecture series, why did he accept the invitation in the first place? We believe the primary reason ran much deeper than his claim that he was "ashamed to refuse a professional challenge of that importance" (James, 1908a, p. 505). We suspect he could not resist the opportunity to flesh out his position on the monism-pluralism issue in the broadly religious context afforded by the Hibbert series.

The history of *A Pluralistic Universe* can be understood, in part, as a continuation and elaboration of a problem that surfaces in almost all of James's scholarly work. James repeatedly argued that the monism-pluralism question is the greatest issue the human mind can frame (see James, 1897/1979, p. 5; 1907/1975, p. 64; 1911/1979, p. 61). He had written a chapter on "The One and the Many" in *Pragmatism* (1907/1975) and another chapter by the same title in *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1911/1979). The Hibbert Lectures, however, afforded an opportunity to explore the issue as it plays out in idealistic philosophies. Themes on religion and monistic idealism and absolutism introduced earlier in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/1985) could now be unpacked in a more nuanced manner. This would become the agenda for *A Pluralistic Universe*.

By most accounts, James's lectures were a major success. In a letter to Henri Bergson, James reported that there were about 500 in attendance at the first lecture (James, 1908c). Indeed, the lectures had to be moved to a larger room to accommodate the crowds. According to one account, James's lectures attracted "an audience far larger . . . than any philosophical lectures ever given before in Oxford" (Carpenter, 1977/1908, p. 220). When James returned to Cambridge he repeated the lectures, again to very large audiences of about six hundred.

The first printing of the eight lectures was published in April of 1909 under the title *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy*. By mid-century, the book had gone through an additional six printings. As we reach the centennial of the initial publication there are five 2007 or 2008 printings available from five different publishers.

Clearly, James still speaks to contemporary scholars and to the public. Nevertheless, it is our conclusion that *A Pluralistic Universe* had little influence on psychology, especially in the early years when there was a quest for grand all-embracing systems. The contemporary appeal of *A Pluralistic Universe* is wrapped and rolled in its relevance to the problems of absolutistic political and philosophical systems and to recent concerns over the problems of unification and diversification in academic disciplines.

James's Critique of Monism

James (1909/1977) made clear at the outset that the general thesis of his Hibbert lectures would consist of "a defense of the pluralistic against the monistic view" (p. 26). He went on to say, "The rest of my lectures will do little more than

make this thesis more concrete, and I hope more persuasive" (p. 26). James's critique of monistic philosophies was energized partly by the affinities he encountered between such philosophies and absolutism.¹ As a side note, it is interesting that his debilitating health issues subsided dramatically as he anticipated his upcoming opportunities to launch attacks on absolutism. In a letter to his brother Henry James dated April 29, 1908, he said "I have been sleeping like a top, and feel in good fighting trim again, eager for the scalp of the absolute. My lectures will put his wretched clerical defenders fairly on the defensive" (James, 1908d, p. 303).

In his opening chapter, James differentiated spiritualistic philosophies from materialistic philosophies and identified spiritualistic philosophies as those that believe "that the intimate and human must surround and underlie the brutal" in the world (James, 1909/1977, p. 16). He further divided spiritualistic philosophies into monistic and pluralistic approaches, the comparison of which would occupy most of *A Pluralistic Universe*, and noted that both approaches seek intimacy with the world and with the divine. Intimacy and foreignness are, for James, experiential effects of world views, and the distinction between humans' experiences of foreignness and intimacy results in "the difference between a general habit of wariness and one of trust" (James, 1909/1977, p. 19). Thus, James emphasized the practical experiential consequences that stem from human choices related to monism and pluralism.

Feelings of intimacy influence human experience in positive ways and are therefore prized in James's pragmatic world view. In *A Pluralistic Universe* and in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* James argued that an experiential and intimate account of the divine is more satisfactory than the notion of the all-encompassing, cold, and absolutistic God of theology. The centrality of intimacy occurred throughout James's discussions of religion, which center on "*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual [humans] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*" (James 1902/1985, p. 34, italics in original). Tensions surrounding the problem of intimacy also surfaced repeatedly in James's provocative chapters on healthy mindedness, the sick soul, and the divided self in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

In *A Pluralistic Universe* James advanced a scathing rejection of the absolute.² The absolute is a "metaphysical monster" with which genuine intimacy is problem-

¹Although James focuses on theistic absolutism in *The Varieties* and in *A Pluralistic Universe*, he also rejects material, methodological, and perspectival absolutes, among others. One observer of James's lectures noted the multifaceted nature of James's attacks on all forms of absolutism as James targeted theistic absolutism in particular. The observer stated "On the 'absolute,' then, taken not as in any sense God, but simply as the hypostatized concept of the Non-contradictory (though occasionally, we fancy, 'he' and 'his' were heard in place of 'it' and 'its'), Professor James hammered blows in right good earnest" (James, 1909/1977, p. 222).

²Fortunately for readers of the *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James fulfilled his hopes, described in a footnote, to return to the problems of monism in a future volume (cf. footnote in James, 1902/1985, p. 358).

atic or impossible (James, 1902/1985, p. 353; 1909/1977, p. 26). The absolute, according to James, can have no environment because nothing could be external to it. It is not in the world; it is the world, the one thing that includes everything. It can have no needs because a need would undermine its perfection. It cannot be surprised because surprise would contradict its omniscience. James tells us, "It can't be patient, for it has to wait for nothing, having everything at once in its possession" (James, 1909/1977, p. 22). The absolute has no history because time collapses if the absolute has everything in its possession at once and knows everything at once. The absolute cannot be without anything, so there is nothing we finite humans can do either to add to or to subtract from its self-sufficiency. We could do nothing to add to the happiness of the absolute because a succession to a happier state would contradict the concept of immutability. The absolute is not in our thoughts so much as we are in its thoughts as projections or objects and not as genuine participants. It is the solipsism of the absolute that precludes the possibility of intimacy with it.

James anchored his views in experience, his "metaphysical ultimate" (Crosby and Viney, 1992, p. 102). James explored experience in its temporal, physical, deliberative, volitional, causal, emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual contexts. He rejected claims that the divine absolute exists as such outside of experience; in the *Varieties* he attacked claims of God's "a-se-ity," the notion that God's existence comes from God's self only (James, 1902/1985 p. 347), as an affront to experience and as without pragmatic value. In *A Pluralistic Universe*, he continued these attacks and emphasized idealists' tendencies to see the divine as beyond temporal, physical, social, and psychological contexts. James contrasted the idealists' view in which the divine and other objects exist "as such" (James, 1909/1977, pp. 32, 34–35) with radical empiricist views in which "an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced" (James, 1912/1976, p. 22). James argued that empiricism includes philosophical topics that influence our lives in our physical, temporal, and social contexts. Idealists want to see objects and, more importantly, the divine, as such, outside of all relations. If God as such exists, would God as such, with the attributes described above, make any experiential difference in our daily lives? For James, any notion of "the absolute as such" remained without value just as an object as such is problematic. For James, experience and reality could not be easily separated.

James extended his attacks to address the methodology of the monistic idealists. He repeatedly used phrases such as "intellectualist philosophy" (James, 1909/1977, p. 37), "the vice of intellectualism" (p. 36), and "intellectualistic" (p. 38). These terms reflected his belief that purely intellectual logic fails to address human experience of the world, and James used the terms with such intensity that they may have leaned toward *ad hominem* attacks. His attacks on several prominent idealistic monists of his day (e.g., J.M.E. McTaggart, Francis

Herbert Bradley, and Alfred Edward Taylor, among others) reached a peak with his discussion of the false dichotomy presented by monistic idealists. He claimed that their arguments rest not on experience but on extreme definitions and logical manipulations. The idealists targeted by James argued, for example, that rationality and irrationality (or one and many) are absolutely unrelated and that these terms must not share any common ground. James rejected these claims logically as well as personally and experientially. He noted that words, concepts, and objects may be related or rational in various degrees. Beyond his logical arguments, he extended his polemic attacks as he claimed that “the commonest vice of the human mind is its disposition to see everything as a yes or no, as black or white” (James, 1909/1977, p. 40). At the heart of James’s views sits the claim that “radical empiricism and pluralism stand out for the legitimacy of the notion of *some*” (James, 1909/1977, pp. 40–41, italics in original). The concept of *some* stands out in opposition to monistic obsessions with such words as *all* or *must*.

Fechner’s Monism

Despite James’s rejection of idealistic monism, he presented the system of monistic idealism proposed by Gustav Fechner’s dayview as a viable option. This decision is particularly surprising because in his earlier psychological writings James had devalued Fechner’s psychophysics as excessively narrow, physiologically-based, and uninteresting. In the *Principles*, James referenced Bacon’s idols as he stated that any formulation of “the Fechnerian *Maasformel* and conception of it as an ultimate ‘psychophysical law’ will remain an ‘idol of the den’” that is not experientially valuable (James, 1890/1981, p. 518, italics in original). James also noted that even Fechner’s harshest critics completed their attacks on Fechner’s ideas “by saying that nevertheless to him belongs the *imperishable glory* of first formulating them and thereby turning psychology into an *exact science*” (James, 1890/1981, p. 518, italics in original). James followed this with a satirical poem.

And everybody praised the Duke
 Who this great fight did win.
 “But what good came of it at last?”
 Quoth little Peterkin.
 “Why, that I cannot tell,” said he,
 “But ’twas a famous victory!”

After such harsh attacks, why did James introduce Fechner’s theological world view to the English-speaking philosophical world as an attractive monistic possibility, particularly after he had so thoroughly devalued the relevance of

Fechner's psychophysics in the *Principles* (1890/1981) almost 20 years before? Adler (1992) noted that James and Fechner shared interests in religion as well as psychical research and, perhaps more importantly, that James had read Fechner's *Über die Seelenfrage* (1861) and *Die Tagesansicht Gegenüber der Nachtsansicht* (1879) by 1905 and *Zend-Avesta* (1851) in 1907, the year before his lectures at Oxford. Additionally, James wrote the introduction to a 1904 translation of Fechner's *Little Book of Life after Death* (1904/2004). In the introduction he appreciatively mentioned Fechner's writings under the name of Dr. Mises as well as Fechner's theological system and experimental work in aesthetics, and he glorified Fechner's experimental work instead of devaluing it as he had done in the *Principles*. Near the end of James's life, he wrote to friends of Fechner's important philosophical contributions and speculated that Fechner's ideas would gain prominence in time (Adler, 1992). Why did James incorporate Fechner's idealistic system into the lectures that would become *A Pluralistic Universe*, even as he so harshly criticized other forms of idealistic monism?

Several aspects of Fechner's views fit Jamesian conceptions of the world and James's emphasis on experience. First, Fechner's views incorporated rather than denied the vast breadth of experience. He provided a monistic system "remarkable for the almost unexampled richness of his imagination of details" (James, 1909/1977, p. 83); his system contrasted "thickness and articulation" of detail (p. 81) with the intellectualistic thinness of idealist logic that was completely removed from daily life. Second, even Fechner's logical argument was experiential. Fechner provided a basic example, namely that our disparate visual and tactile senses are separate but that they come together into our unified consciousness of both the look and the feel of an object. From this example rooted in personal experience, Fechner then argued from analogy that unified consciousness can emerge in other complex systems. He extended this argument to incorporate belief in the emergent consciousness of plants, animals, social systems, the earth as a whole, and the universe as a whole, which would comprise, in Fechner's view, God. James resonated strongly to both Fechner's experiential analogy and Fechner's claims of other types of consciousness (see James, 1898/2004, for James's views of animal consciousness). Third, rather than logically removing experiential difficulties as idealists may do, Fechner's monism included both conjunctions and disjunctions that humans perceive in experience; Fechner's acceptance of the validity of nonconnectors endeared him to James. Fourth, Fechner's monism was speculative. His analogy led readers to infer that the ultimate organization (i.e., the universe) could have an ultimate consciousness. This panpsychic entity would include everything and would be similar to the idealist absolute; however, Fechner suggested that such an absolute *may* exist in contrast with idealists who argued that the existence of the absolute is an inescapable logical requirement. Finally, just as James argued against "second hand" religion (James, 1902/1985, p. 33), he argued against derivative "second

hand" philosophical systems (James, 1909/1977, p. 72). James views Fechner "not as if [Fechner] were one of the common herd of professorial philosophic scribes . . ." but as one "who sees" (James, 1909/1977, p. 72, italics in original), a powerful compliment from a Jamesian world view. For James, any monism was a hypothesis, and he resonated strongly to Fechner's speculative monistic view, particularly over the views of idealists who insisted that monism is logically necessary.

Dimensions of Jamesian Pluralism

James's pluralism served many functions in his world view. It flowed from his radically empirical perspective and was reflected in his approach to practical questions in teaching (1899/1983) and religion (1902/1985). His pluralism embraced the connections and the disconnections found in experience. For example, he believed that there is not always an easy saving explanation for some of the sudden tragedies, the brokenness, and the pain encountered in day to day experience. Some things just happen in dead blank, brutal, and unpredictable ways. One of James's criticisms of monism was that it creates a problem of evil. "Evil, for pluralism, presents only the practical problem of how to get rid of it. For monism, the puzzle is theoretical: How — if Perfection be the source, should there be Imperfection?" (James, 1911/1979, p. 72). Although James evaluated forms of monism as hypotheses, the clean tightly connected logical absolutes of monism which preclude the possibility of any independence anywhere conflicted with the sometimes messy and promiscuous plurality of real things in human experience.

Pluralism, for James, followed from empirical methods. James identified his empirical method with inductive reasoning; James argued that empiricists should start with experiences of the parts and proceed carefully to the consideration of wholes (James, 1911/1979). His dedication to the parts as the primary starting points for philosophy reflected one of the dimensions of his pluralistic world view. From experience, James (1907/1975) concluded "the world that we live in exists diffused and distributed in the form of an indefinitely numerous lot of eaches, coherent in all sorts of ways and degrees" (p. 126). More specifically, although James endorsed a variety of methodologies and prioritized the fit between the methods and the problems under scrutiny, he demonstrated his own preferences in data collection. For example, James (1902/1985) reviewed religious conversions from many individuals across several cultures before drawing even tentative conclusions about religious conversion (see Woody, 2003). James took similar approaches in his classic chapters on mysticism and saintliness, among others in the *Varieties* (1902/1985), as well as in *Talks to Teachers* (1899/1983).

James's radical empiricism also emphasized the idea that relations are as real as the things related. He was frustrated with classical empiricism, or as he called

it, “bugaboo” empiricism (1909/1977, p. 147), because it “has always shown a tendency to do away with the connexions of things” (1912/1976, p. 23). James believed that a word such as *or* names a genuine reality. Even early in his psychological work, James argued for relations; in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890/1981) he noted that we hear the sound of thunder in relation to silence instead of the sound of thunder as such. As discussed previously, his emphasis on conjunctions did not set him apart from idealists or other monists, but his recognition of and refusal to deny the disjunctions in experience took him far from monistic camps.

James viewed the world as a work in progress. Our experience will always provide new data, particularly as methods, expectations, and world views shift across time and culture. Therefore, he could view any proposed monistic theory as a hypothesis, much as he viewed Fechner’s panpsychic perspective as a hypothesis worthy of attention and inquiry. Because reality grows just as experience grows, new data could possibly guide us to monistic conclusions; however, our multifaceted and often contradictory experience leads James to believe provisionally in a more promiscuous world that will always include both disjunctions and conjunctions. What practical effects come from a pluralistic world view, and what does a pluralistic world view suggest for scientific disciplines?

Implications for Current Debates on Unification

The problems associated with unification and diversity have raised concerns in a variety of disciplines including philosophy (Resher, 1993), sociology (Simpson and Simpson, 1994; Stinchcombe, 1994), anthropology (Clark and Willermet, 1997; Godelier, 1997; Shore, 1996), and biology (Nissen, 1997; Rose, 1998; Viney, 1998). There have also been divisions among physicists over questions of fundamentality in their discipline (Galison, 1996). There have been extensive debates among psychologists over the relative merits of unification vs. diversity (see e.g., Kimble, 2005; Slife, Wiggins, and Graham, 2005; Staats, 2005; Sternberg, 2005; Sternberg and Grigorenko, 2001; Viney, 1996, 2004). The general problem of disunity in the sciences has also been the subject of major anthologies such as Galison and Stump’s (1996) book *The Disunity of the Sciences* and Dupré’s (1993) treatise *The Disorder of Things: Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of the Sciences*.

Yanchar and Slife (2000), among others (e.g., Sternberg and Grigorenko, 2001), noted that proponents of unity in psychology do not take a unified approach to the question. For example, Staats (1999) recommended, among other steps, a group of theorists dedicated to finding common ground among psychology’s many theories and definitions. Kimble (1994) suggested that psychologists unite to define the discipline as the science of behavior. Sternberg and Grigorenko (2001) proposed that psychologists, along with scholars in related fields, tran-

scend disciplinary lines, study a broad range of methodologies, and participate in integrated study of psychological phenomena from many perspectives. The latter proposal reflects James's ideas in that Sternberg and Grigorenko (2001) recommend concurrent study of phenomena from multiple perspectives and do not prioritize any particular theory or methodological foundation. Indeed, Sternberg's (2005) edited collection of essays on unity in psychology provides a wide range of perspectives, and the book is "dedicated to the memory of William James, the first great American unifier of psychology" (p. vi). How would William James perceive these recent attempts to bring unity to psychology?

James's interest in the theoretical and metaphysical implications of monism and pluralism were complemented by his concern with the practical, social, and intellectual problems associated with unification and diversity. He recognized the sublimity and aesthetic appeal of a *tight* perfectly unified world in which there is a theoretical solution for every problem and an ultimate and satisfactory answer for all the disconnections, mutations, and brokenness encountered in the stream of experience. But just as he was dubious about the possibility of a closed-in thoroughly connected block universe, he was suspicious about the promissory claims of all unification schemes.

The major reasons for James's suspicions about the promissory claims of unification plans are straightforward. First, for James, reality is a verb. He is counted among process philosophers such as Whitehead and Hartshorne who believed in a world-in-the-making with an uncertain destiny, real struggles, and genuine emergent qualities, mutations, surprises, and novelty. The danger of any strong unification scheme in such a world is that the scheme could interfere with the capacity to be responsive to new events and developments that fall outside the boundaries of orthodoxy. James was deeply concerned about systematic intellectual strictures that blind us to the robust, effusive, evolving character of reality. For James, reality itself is pluralistic. We believe that he would have resonated to some aspects of the unification hopes of Sternberg and Grigorenko (2001), as noted previously, but we believe that James would argue that all phenomena should be approached, both substantively and methodologically, from pluralistic perspectives. For James, even as groups of scholars integrate methods and views to study a unified topic, their disparate perspectives reflect a variety of individual experiences and a plurality of individual phenomena instead of unity. Beyond methods and perspectives, for James, the phenomena of psychology are inherently and genuinely pluralistic; a "philosophy of pure experience must tend toward pluralism in its ontology" (James, 1905, p. 36). In addition to these ideas, James was concerned that a glut of unity could place us in an intellectual harness that restricts discovery. He believed that as the world evolves, we discover many connections and provisional unities, but we also discover new disconnections that demand inclusion and that require continual examination and alterations in the pictures we construct.

Conclusions

Throughout *A Pluralistic Universe* James argued for pluralism and against monism in general and monistic idealism in particular. His attacks and recommendations reflected his dedication to experience as a foundation for philosophy and his commitment to evaluating practical outcomes of beliefs. As noted above, James argued that pluralism fits our experience, avoids the creation of the “metaphysical monster” of an infinite God, and is more intimate, which in turn brings important practical outcomes for the daily experience of individual humans. Beyond these philosophical considerations, James’s world views provide an adaptive set of tools with which to examine our own discipline, including the potential pitfalls of premature or forced unification and the benefits of the admittedly more messy, yet extremely productive, diversity of views in psychological science.

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