



A Pluralistic Universe

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*William James*

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## A Pluralistic Universe Details

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## From Reader Review A Pluralistic Universe for online ebook

### Illiterate says

James' powerful criticisms of rationalism support something like his pluralism but not his panpsychism. The latter is, moreover, irrelevant to action.

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### Andrew Simmons says

There are ways to write about plurality, incompleteness, and dialectic that can actually be complete. The problem here is that I spent the vast amount of time wondering what James's point actually was. At one point he decries monism for intellectualism and rationalism, but then will speak of the rationalists as breaking up reality into fragments. This leads to confusing instances in which he says the fragmentation of things prevents the realization of the wholeness, but the whole requires parts and thus would require the breaking of things into parts in order to constitute a wholeness...This becomes a factor when speaking of Bergson and movement in which he comments how rationalism has split movement into a near infinite number of intervals (e.g. Zeno), which becomes contradictory as experienced movement is witnessed without specific intervals. The problem with this is that movements would be absorbed back into movement, meaning all particular movements would be indistinguishable from movement, creating a monism. His plunge into the irrational further begins what can be considered the self defeating nature of this text, as the remainder of the text can be considered a monism of the irrational. But don't worry, at least there is still the plurality of what ever pragmatically works for you and other subjects....despite no real indication of how "you" would be, or how perspective really differentiates something as a part of the pluralistic universe. One can see from this work why Deleuze, being influenced by William James, will just speak of "plurality = monism."

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### Eric Herod says

Proper understanding of the thought of William James is incomplete without undertaking "Essays in Radical Empiricism" and "Pluralistic Universe". The former presents a structure for James' philosophy, the latter presents the conclusions he draws from his 'pure experience' philosophy. These conclusions, given in the final lecture of the book, are unexpected and utterly disappointing. While James goes off the deep end in his chapter on Fechner and in his concluding chapter, there are bright moments. My favorite section of the book is James treatment of analytic philosophy with his critique of Xeno's paradox. The low rating I give this book stems mainly from the final chapter, which finds James destroying (in my opinion) everything which he built up in "Essays" and the preceding chapters of "Pluralistic".

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### Robin Friedman says

#### William James's Pluralistic Universe

William James is best-known for his development of the American philosophy of pragmatism and for his pioneering work in psychology. But in addition to pragmatism, which he described as a method and as a

theory of truth, James expounded a broad philosophical doctrine which he called radical empiricism (pluralism). Radical pluralism, as James explained it, constituted a metaphysical position -- one describing the nature of reality -- rather than a method. In his book, "Pragmatism", James maintained that his commitment to radical empiricism was separate from his commitment to pragmatism; but in the Preface to his book, "The Meaning of Truth", James maintained that the success of the pragmatic account of truth was vital to making radical empiricism prevail.

James's fullest development of the theory of radical empiricism was in his book "A Pluralistic Universe" published in 1908. This book consists of the text of eight lectures James delivered in that year at London and at Harvard. In common with James's other works, "A Pluralistic Universe" attacks the monistic idealism derived from Hegel and followed by many of James's contemporaries in England and the United States, such as his colleague, Josiah Royce. But James goes much further than he had in his earlier writings. He offers a critique of logic, conceptual thinking and what he describes as "intellectualism" in philosophy. He urges a return to immediate experience as the basis for philosophical thinking. He develops a philosophy which is pluralistic and contingent -- which leaves room for chance, surprise, and moral action -- and which is essentially idealistic. The driving force behind the philosophy is spiritual, as James argues for panpsychism, pantheism, a finite god (or gods) and the possibility of growth.

James gives two philosophers a great deal of attention in developing his position. The first is the German thinker Gustav Fechner (Lecture IV in "A Pluralistic Universe"), who developed a theory of earth-soul holding that everything in the universe was alive with mind. Fechner's work became the basis of James's pansychism and of his theory of compounding consciousness -- that mind could grow from one thing to another and that there was an interrelationship between the human mind and the mind of a finite god. The second major influence on "A Pluralistic Universe" was the French philosopher Henri Bergson (Chapter VI). From Bergson, James described his critique of intellectualism and conceptual thinking. James argued that concepts were useful in understanding reality for limited purposes, (here James seems to be downplaying his own pragmatism) but that they ultimately distorted reality. Reality was a flow, a stream, in which one moment glided imperceptibly into the next and arose from a past moment. In this view of perception and reality, James rejected the atomistic, sensationalist view of experience of the British empiricists, describing this view as conceptualist in its own right. His view of consciousness was similar to that of another German philosopher, Edmund Husserl, who admired James greatly.

James best sets out the goal and the heart of his teaching in his opening lecture, "The Types of Philosophic Thinking." In this chapter, he stresses the importance of vision in philosophy -- the presentation of a convincing and inspiring view of life -- and downplays the importance of the arguments that are brought to bear in support of the vision. He also limits carefully the scope of his discussion. James at the outset rejects philosophies of materialism or scientism in favor of a philosophy that teaches that "the intimate and human must surround and underlie the brutal." He describes this teaching as the "spiritual" way of thinking.

James next distinguishes between a theistic conception of spiritualism which posits God as a creator separate from the universe and a pantheistic version, which argues that God is immanent as "the indwelling divine rather than the external creator, and of human life as part and parcel of that deep reality." James rejects the theistic position and opts instead for a pantheistic view of spirituality. It is important to see these self-imposed limitations on James's thought and to see as well how close James was to the absolute idealism of his day even when he criticized it severely. Hegel and Royce have, in spite of the criticisms he leveled at them, a large role in James's thought.

In the final lecture of "A Pluralistic Universe" James resumes themes he had raised earlier in "The Varieties of Religious Experience." He argues that accounts of individual religious experience suggest a way of

approaching reality broader and more profound than anything that "paganism, naturalism, and legalism pin their faith on and tie their trust to." James argues that "the drift of all the evidence we have seems to me to sweep us very strongly towards the belief in some form of superhuman life with which we may, unknown to ourselves, be co-conscious. We may be in the universe as dogs and cats are in our libraries, seeing the books and hearing the conversation, but having no inkling of the meaning of it all." James distinguishes his position from absolute idealism by working from the bottom up -- from individual, plural consciousness rather than from the top down -- from an abstract, intellectually conceived absolute. He advocates a philosophy of meliorism and activity in which individual persons work to bring the good to pass.

This book, James's last sustained work in philosophy, moves towards its own unique form of idealism and establishes James as a thinker in a large manner. The book seems to me to rest uneasily with his pragmatism at many places. "A Pluralistic Universe" is a provocative and moving work by a major American thinker.

Robin Friedman

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### **Sara-Maria Sorentino says**

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### **Naeem says**

This is one of the best critiques of Hegel's dialectical method. About as clear as philosophical writing gets. Only one that compares as a writer is Collingwood.

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### **Christopher says**

I read this for a political seminar class a while ago and just recently dipped into it again. Here's my take:

Though I don't subscribe to the total relativism of radical empiricism, I still firmly believe that a pluralistic outlook on life can best enable intellectual freedom and personal development. The only way to break from the status quo and change is by embracing difference. Focusing first on studying the differences in things will eventually result in a broader, more thorough sense of unity than a monistic approach to learning (which stresses similarities above all). This really amounts to being drawn to the unfamiliar, the unknown, and finding its working order through common connections, thus bringing it into your sphere of knowledge. A pluralistic approach to education does far more to expand one's horizons than a monistic approach, the latter being too centralized and not permitting the mind to stray far from a generalized mean. This pluralistic approach to learning is the true meaning of a liberal education. We need James' pluralistic empiricism more than ever now in our age of television news pundits and mass media.

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### **Kara says**

Interesting read, but definitely a tough one to dig through.

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