“All that my pluralism contends for is that there is no where extant a complete gathering up of the universe in one focus, either of knowledge, power, or purpose. Something escapes, even from God.” William James, letter to Minot Judson Savage, January, 1910

1. Introduction

By now we are so familiar with the term pluralism that even though we still don’t quite know what it means, we are quite comfortable using it, and can easily imagine that it has been with us for a long time. It is, however, a relatively recent addition to philosophy, little more than a hundred years old. Pluralism and pluralist had established, non-philosophical uses as early as the seventeenth century, when they referred to the practice of holding two church offices at one time. It was in this sense that an eighteenth century writer condemned Cardinal Wolsey as “a scandalous pluralist,” and in which Jeremy Bentham, writing in 1818, described churchmen who obtained offices on “false pretences, as proved by Non-Residence, Pluralism, and Sinecurism.”

In German, the related term der Pluralismus has an older philosophical lineage, appearing in Kant’s Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View (1796). Kant writes: “The opposite of egoism can only be pluralism, that is, the way of thinking in which one is not concerned merely with oneself as the whole world, but rather regards and conducts oneself as a mere citizen of the world.” This pregnant statement conceives pluralism as a “way of thinking” that involves recognition of others and a certain humility, and in this way anticipates the
ethical pluralism James develops in “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” (1899). But it gives little hint of the proliferation of the term in English language metaphysics and epistemology at the turn of the nineteenth century. The point of origin for this proliferation is William James.

In an entry on “Pluralism” for Baldwin’s Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology in 1901, John Dewey writes:

The term pluralism is very recent in English. Bowne uses the term incidentally in Philos. of Theism, 57; James has probably done more than anyone else to give it currency, in his Will to Believe (see Preface in particular); and Howison employs it to denote the substantially distinct existence of free ethical personalities.

Dewey is right about James’s crucial role in advancing the idea or ideas of pluralism and about the importance of The Will to Believe in that enterprise, but he couldn’t have known in 1901 that the term would appear in the title of one of James’s metaphysical works in the next decade (A Pluralistic Universe (1908)), nor that it would enter deeply into James’s conception of pragmatism, which he frequently called “pluralistic pragmatism.” Nor could Dewey have anticipated the work of a French philosopher whom it is a particular pleasure to acknowledge in an essay published in France. Jean Wahl’s Les Philosophies Pluralistes d’Angleterre et d’Amérique (1920) employs the term “pluralism” to organize a whole period of American and British philosophy, with William James the central figure, but including Gustav Fechner, Hermann Lötze, Wilhelm Wundt, Charles Renouvier, John Stuart Mill, John Dewey, Horace Kallen, George Santayana, Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller, George Holmes Howison, even Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore.

Wahl distinguishes noetic or epistemological, metaphysical, aesthetic, moral, religious, and logical pluralisms. Following James (W, 558), he states that noetic pluralism is the view that “the facts and worths of life need many cognizers to take them in. There is no point of view absolutely public and universal.” Metaphysically, “pluralism is a philosophy which insists by preference on diversity of principles...it asserts both the diverse character and the temporal character of things.” James employs the terms pluralism and pluralistic in these and other senses, among which I will pay particular attention to the following:

4 Fred Rothwell’s translation, The Pluralist Philosophies of England and America was published by Open Court in 1925.
5 References to James, Writings, 1902-1910 are incorporated in the text.
6 Wahl, p. 155.
7 Ibid., p. 275.
1. Pluralism as equivalent to indeterminism generally, and human freedom in particular.

2. Extractive pluralism. Pluralism in sense 1 is often combined with, or said to be an instance of, the claim that any event or entity might have been removed or extracted from the universe without changing anything else.\(^8\)

3. Entity pluralism: there are many particulars, each unique. In his later writing James holds the “mystical” view that these particulars are not fully describable or able to be captured or rendered in concepts.

4. Scheme pluralism. There are many correct schemes for describing the universe. This can be thought of as epistemological or metaphysical, depending on whether one thinks schemes are merely human or part of reality.

4a. Vertical scheme pluralism. There are different non-rival schemes, for example those of mathematics, ethics, and physics.

4b. Horizontal scheme pluralism: there can be more than one correct account of how things are in any given domain.\(^9\)

5. Point of view pluralism. There are many legitimate but—at least in some cases—incommensurable points of view on the universe. James is particularly interested in the cases of human/human, human/animal, and human/higher consciousness points of view.

6. Ethical pluralism: there are different reasonable or valid systems of values or forms of life, which we should respect.

James wrote that the pragmatic method in philosophy brings “out of each word its practical cash-value, set[s] it at work within the stream of your experience” (W, 509). So it is with pluralism, a term James worked with, like a trusted companion, for almost thirty years, from the papers of the early eighteen eighties through The Will to Believe, Varieties of Religious Experience and then, with gathering momentum, in Pragmatism, A Pluralistic Universe, and his unfinished last work, Some Problems of Philosophy. James began using the term as

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\(^8\) There appears to be a conflict between extractive pluralism and James’s mystical, “mushing together,” Bergsonian view as delineated in Gale’s The Divided Self of William James, pp. 288 ff.

\(^9\) I take this language from Baghramian, p. 304.
a synonym for metaphysical indeterminism, but soon expanded its employment to other metaphysical doctrines, for example, that the world is composed of no one system, and that it is a series of unique particulars. He also used it for the epistemological claims that no account of the world and no point of view can take it all in; and for a series of ethical and political views based on a radical individualism. These doctrines all cohere with James’s basic vision of an open, multifaceted universe within which human action sometimes makes a real difference. Wahl memorably characterizes this outlook when he writes:

Deep in the soul of the pluralist is a sort of contradictory desire: the desire on the one hand to feel himself half crushed by the forces against which he struggles, leveling and democratizing forces; he wants the sensations of limits he cannot transcend. But along with this desire to feel cramped, so to speak, the pluralist abhors anything that is well-arranged, ordered, regular. He wishes to breathe freely, to “take his chance”; he does not wish to feel that he is living in a prosy, commonplace way, “close to the ground,” but rather that he is up aloft, with expanded vision in the midst of aerial perspectives. His philosophy would leave windows and doors wide open.10

The windows and doors are wide open to the possibilities of other perspectives, other explanations, and to the reality of that which can’t quite be apprehended. The “contradictory desires” discerned by Wahl characterize James’s writing from its inception. In one of his earliest publications, “The Sentiment of Rationality” (1879), James attacks the absolute idealism of his day for its “narrow, close, sick-room air.” Let “the tides flow,” he writes “even though they flow over us” (WB, 90)11. Yet James also rejects forms of materialism that deny to “our most intimate powers…all relevancy in universal affairs” (WB, 82-3). Both the intimacy and the wildness take pluralistic forms. There is no “One,” James holds, with which we are intimate, but rather a distribution of moments and events; and the wild universe is not unstructured but can be comprehended and manipulated by a variety of schemes and techniques. From each of these schemes and events, however, something always escapes.

2. Pluralism Before 1900

James published unsigned reviews and notices in magazines such as the Nation in the mid eighteen seventies, and his first philosophical papers at the end of the

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11 Citations from James’s The Will to Believe are incorporated in the text.
decade. In the early eighteen eighties he published many of the essays that were to appear in *The Will to Believe* (1897), and it is in some of these that *pluralism* first makes its appearance in its new, philosophical senses. The first of these papers is “On Some Hegelisms,” published in *Mind* in 1882, about which James wrote to Charles Renouvier:

I have sent you lately a paper on some Hegelisms of which I flattered myself that the positive parts would please you more than anything I have yet written. They are an attempt to formulate your pluralism and empiricism in a shorter and more popular way than I have met with elsewhere; and I should hope the formulation might make some impression on the students of the English and Scotch Universities, if any read the article.\(^{12}\)

As with many of his technical terms, James here attributes the origin of *pluralism* to someone else.

In a letter to Renouvier six months later, James states: “After all, pluralism & indeterminism seem to be but two ways of stating the same thing.”\(^{13}\) If one searches “On Some Hegelisms” for the pluralism that is said by James to be found there one fails to find the words “pluralism” or “pluralist,” although there are certainly remarks about indeterminism. However, James’s index for *The Will to Believe*, compiled in 1896, lists two pages in the “Hegelisms” paper under the term “pluralism.” On one of these pages, James argues against the tendency to unify and homogenize reality, to make it all part of one scheme. Space is such a unifying system, he concedes, but when we turn to “material reality” we find a “fearful jolting,” “the continuity ruptured on every side.” In particular we find each atom an independent fact,

the existence of any one of which in no wise seems to involve the existence of the rest. We have not banished discontinuity, we have only made it finer-grained. And to get even that degree of rationality into the universe we have had to butcher a great part of its contents. The secondary qualities we stripped off from the reality and swept into the dust-bin labeled ‘subjective illusion,’ still *as such* are facts, and must themselves be rationalized in some way (WB, 267).

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12 James, *Correspondence*, v. 5. p. 208. James wrote in the Preface to *The Will to Believe* that he included the paper in the collection in part “because the essay casts some positive light on the pluralist-empiricist point of view” (WB, xiii).

In asserting the atoms’s independence from one another James asserts the thesis I’ve called extractive pluralism, and in asserting the discontinuity between secondary qualities, such as color or even beauty, and the qualities discussed in materialistic science he advances a form of scheme pluralism. The indeterminism of which he wrote to Renouvier follows from extractive pluralism as James presents it: on the atomic level at least there is, James asserts, no necessity to any given configuration of atoms; and given any particular configuration, a range of other configurations is possible.

A few pages later in the “Hegelisms” paper James argues for metaphysical freedom in a context that includes a pluralistic epistemology:

Why, if one act of knowledge could from one point take in the total perspective, with all mere possibilities abolished, should there ever have been anything more than that act? Why duplicate it by the tedious unrolling, inch by inch, of the foredone reality? No answer seems possible. On the other hand, if we stipulate only a partial community of partially independent powers, we see perfectly why no one part controls the whole view, but each detail must come and be actually given, before, in any special sense, it can be said to be determined at all (WB, 271).

The subject of the opening sentence here is “knowledge,” but there is clearly a concern here for freedom as well, for what it “determined.” If “each detail” of the universe can be discerned from “the total perspective” then its actual “unrolling” in time would be “tedious” from that point of view. James wants both to assert that the universe is not determined (“each detail must come and be actually given, before…it can be said to be determined at all”), and that there is no point of view from which the universe can be fully known. These are independent theses: the universe might be available only from multiple points of view but determined from the perspective of each; and it might be available only from one point of view but not determined from that point of view.

James’s fondness for the word “pluralism” as a tag for his own position is evident in the letters to Renouvier of 1882, but his first published use of the term only occurs two years later in “The Dilemma of Determinism” (1884) where, as in the letters to Renouvier, James stresses the connection with indeterminism. For the determinist, James asserts, “the future has no ambiguous possibilities in its womb; the part we call the present is compatible with only one totality” (WB, 150). Indeterminism affirms that there is “a certain amount of loose play” in the universe, and denies that the world is
one unbending unit of fact. It says there is a certain ultimate pluralism in it; and, so saying, it corroborates our ordinary unsophisticated view of things. To that view, actualities seem to float in a wider sea of possibilities from out of which they are chosen; and, somewhere, indeterminism says, such possibilities exist, and form a part of truth (WB, 151).

The basic question, as James summarizes it, concerns the “existence of possibilities,” and pluralism is here the position that such possibilities are real.

Near the end of “The Dilemma of Determinism,” “pluralism” appears again, several times. It now appears to signify an amalgam of indeterminism or chance, an associated moral hope, and the idea that the universe cannot be understood from only one point of view. James writes that his “indeterminism” “gives us a pluralistic, restless universe, in which no single point of view can ever take in the whole scene; and to a mind possessed of the love of unity at any cost, it will, no doubt, remain forever unacceptable” (WB, 177). He adds that “the philosophy of pluralism...lets me feel that a world with a chance in it of being altogether good, even if the chance never come to pass, is better than a world with no such chance at all. … the chance that in moral respects the future may be other and better than the past has been...is the vital air which lets the world live, the salt which keeps it sweet” (WB, 178-9). Here in 1884, James first uses the terms pluralism and pluralistic to apply to the point-of-view pluralism he had set out two years earlier in “On Some Hegelisms.” Reading such a passage, where the moral motivation is so strong, one sees a source of Wahl’s claim that James’s pluralist is essentially committed to “taking his chance” in the universe.

Pluralism as a more developed and considered philosophical view remains dormant, however, until James writes the Preface to The Will to Believe twelve years after the publication of “The Dilemma of Determinism.” James once again blends the moral with the metaphysical and epistemological, and offers an especially robust denial that there is a single point of view from which the universe can be understood.14 He states:

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14 Is not James himself taking such a point of view, call it “pluralism”? This is one of the troubling questions to which James’s view gives rise. As a pragmatist and a fallibilist, James is committed to putting forth any theory in a provisional manner, and I think James goes some way towards showing the “cash value” of his pluralism in various contexts. Still the objection may be pressed that what is provisionally stated is supposed to be possibly true, and the pluralist outlook is self-contradictory or at least such that if it is true then it is false. I’m sure that James would want to reply that the work the term does shows where its meaning lies, and that it is true “in so far forth,” as a guide to future and an explainer of past experience.
The difference between monism and pluralism is perhaps the most pregnant of all the differences in philosophy. Prima facie the world is a pluralism; as we find it, its unity seems to be that of any collection; and our higher thinking consists chiefly of an effort to redeem it from that first crude form. … But absolute unity, in spite of brilliant dashes in its direction, still remains undiscovered, still remains a Grenzbegriff. “Ever not quite” must be the rationalistic philosopher’s last confession concerning it. After all that reason can do has been done, there still remains the opacity of the finite facts as merely given, with most of their peculiarities mutually unmediated and unexplained. To the very last, there are the various ‘points of view’ which the philosopher must distinguish in discussing the world; and what is inwardly clear from one point remains a bare externality and datum to the other…. Something—“call it fate, chance, freedom, spontaneity, the devil, what you will”—is still wrong and other and outside and unincluded, from your point of view, even though you be the greatest of philosophers…..

There is no possible point of view from which the world can appear an absolutely single fact. Real possibilities, real indeterminations, real beginnings, real ends, real evil, real crises, catastrophes, and escapes, a real God, and a real moral life, just as commonsense conceives these things, may remain in empiricism as conceptions which that philosophy gives up the attempt either to ‘over come’ or to reinterpret in monistic form (WB, viii-ix).

James thinks that something always escapes from any point of view or any scheme. There is, he says, “no possible point of view from which the world can appear an absolutely single fact.” No matter how accurate these schemes are no one of them is ever quite right: James’s way of saying this, “ever not quite,” is a quotation of the American writer Benjamin Paul Blood, whose “pluralistic mysticism” would leave a permanent deposit in James’s late writings.

Point of view pluralism appears in another important essay from this period, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” published in 1899 in James’s Talks to Teachers. The essay’s central subject is “the blindness with which we are all afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves.”15 James addresses our mutual comprehension and incomprehension in both areas: “creatures” and “people.” He begins with dogs:

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15 James, Talks to Teachers, p. 229.
Take our dogs and ourselves, connected as we are by a tie more intimate than most ties in this world; and yet, outside of that tie of friendly fondness, how insensible, each of us, to all that makes life significant for the other?—we to the rapture of bones under hedges, or smells of trees and lamp-posts, they to the delights of literature and art. As you sit reading the most moving romance you ever fell upon, what sort of a judge is your fox-terrier of your behavior? With all his good will toward you, the nature of your conduct is absolutely excluded from his comprehension. To sit there like a senseless statue, when you might be taking him to walk and throwing sticks for him to catch! What queer disease is this that comes over you every day, of holding things and staring at them like that for hours together, paralyzed of motion, and vacant of all conscious life!\(^6\)

What sweet irony that in James’s little narrative it is the dog who finds us “vacant of conscious life”! This passage displays James’s determination to grant the reality of other points of view, other forms of life as we now say, acknowledging both our “intimacy” with them and our ability to comprehend them in part, but also acknowledging our necessary incomprehension of, our epistemological distance from, one another. It is not simply that we cannot know how things appear from their point of view but that (as in the fascinating smells of lampposts) dogs have access to parts or aspects of reality that we do not. It may certainly be said that James shows some comprehension in speaking from the dog’s point of view, and that he uses a fully human imaginary in having the dog compare us to a statue and deny that we are conscious. But James also insists that the comprehension is at most partial.

James next extends his argument to other human beings by means of an example from his travels in the mountains of North Carolina, where he encounters a scene of devastation: the forest has been cut down, and there are ugly scars on the land. After talking to the settlers, however, James comes to see that for them the scene expresses “duty, struggle, and success…. I had been as blind to the peculiar ideality of their conditions, as they certainly would also have been to the ideality of mine, had they had a peep at my strange indoor academic ways of life at Cambridge.”\(^7\) The settlers, much like the dog, cannot make sense of James’s “strange indoor academic ways of life.” Nevertheless, these differing human viewpoints are not completely sealed off from one another, for in the case

\(^{16}\) Ibid., pp. 230-1.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., pp. 233-4.
James describes he overcomes his blindness. The possibility of such expanded vision is a presupposition of James’s call, in the concluding paragraph of the essay, for tolerance and openness to others. It is as if a command and a prohibition issues from the plurality of perspectives.

...what is the result of all these considerations and quotations? It is negative in one sense, but positive in another. It absolutely forbids us to be forward in pronouncing on the meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own; and it commands us to tolerate, respect, and indulge those whom we see harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us. Hands off: neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands. Even prisons and sick-rooms have their special revelations. It is enough to ask of each of us that he should be faithful to his own opportunities and make the most of his own blessings, without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field.¹⁸

James blends the moral with the epistemological here, but in a way different from “The Dilemma of Determinism,” where his ethical considerations take off from his ontology of an open universe. In such a universe, James emphasizes, no one knows how some things will turn out, and there is room for human choice and action to make a difference. In “A Certain Blindness” the things we do not know are not in the future but in the variety of human and animal viewpoints, past, present and future. There is “truth” that others know that we may find “unintelligible,” “insight” that others have that we cannot attain. We must, James holds, carve out a space in our conception of things for that which we cannot know (James here anticipates Thomas Nagel and Colin McGinn),¹⁹ and we must tolerate, respect, and even indulge others because of our sense that they have “a partial superiority of insight” that we do not. So the epistemological—the “partial superiority of insight”—is a basis for the ethical injunction to tolerate, respect, and indulge others. But of course the toleration is in the service of truth, another species of the good, as James will come to say in *Pragmatism*. We are to respect others precisely (if not only) because they may know truths that we do not, in some cases truths that we cannot know.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 264.
3. Pragmatism and Pluralism

In his letters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, James continues to identify himself as a pluralist, and he resolves to write a book systematically setting out the position he calls “pluralistic pragmatism.” To the Polish philosopher Wincenty Lutoslawski (1863-1954), he writes:

I am growing, myself, more and more pluralistic and individualistic in my general views of things; and I think that against the monism which dominates everywhere the philosophic mind, men are needed to stand stoutly up for that opposite view. Probably the rest of my life will be devoted to defending it more and more.20

To Francois Pillon, James writes of plans for a new pluralistic empiricist book: “I expect, on returning to the country, to begin the writing of a somewhat systematic book on philosophy—my humble view of the world—pluralistic, tychistic, empiricist, pragmatic, and ultra gothic, i. e. non classic in form.”21

The following year, 1904, he writes to Pillon that his philosophy “is what I call a radical empiricism, a pluralism, a “tychism,” which represents order as being gradually won and always in the making.”22

By this time James had already employed a pragmatic and pluralistic approach in The Varieties of Religious Experience,23 where, as his title indicates, it is the varieties rather than the “essence” of religious experience that are his subject. The book in fact contains an important statement of “scheme pluralism,” as James observes that the universe is

a more many-sided affair than any sect, even the scientific sect, allows for….the world can be handled according to many systems of ideas, and is so handled by different men, and will each time give some characteristic kind of profit, for which he cares, to the handler, while at the same time some other kind of profit has to be omitted or postponed (W, 116).

This is a deeply pragmatic passage, with its talk of ideas as practical rather than mimetic, tools for “handling” the world rather than pictures of it. The passage is also deeply pluralistic: metaphysically, in asserting the multiple aspects of the universe (it is “a many-sided affair”), and epistemologically, in describing a plurality of “systems of ideas.” The different “systems of ideas”

20 James, Correspondence, v. 8 p. 196.
need not conflict in any logical way, so far as this statement goes, but they at least crowd one another out.

If *Pragmatism* (1907) is the full-fledged pluralist empiricist book that James was hoping to produce, where in its pages do we find pluralist themes most prominently, and what advances in James’s position do they provide? An obvious site is the book’s fourth chapter, “The One and the Many” where James asserts that the conflict between the “monist” or proponent of the one, and the “pluralist” or proponent of the many is the “most central” in philosophy: “if you know whether a man is a decided monist or a decided pluralist, you perhaps know more about the rest of his opinions than if you give him any other name ending in *ist.” As usual, James wants to stake out a middle position in which the claims of both sides are met, but not in their “absolute” forms. He denies that there is a single overarching unity but not that there is some unity. But he argues that philosophers have overemphasized unity. What, he asks,

about the variety in things? Is that such an irrelevant matter? If instead of using the term philosophy, we talk in general of our intellect and its needs, we quickly see that unity is only one of these. … acquaintance with reality’s diversities is as important as understanding their connexion. The human passion of curiosity runs on all fours with the systematizing passion (W, 542).

The world may be “systematized,” James argues, in many ways (as he had said in *Varieties*), for example, as “one subject of discourse” (W, 543). This hardly tells us much about the world however, about whether it is chaotic, for example, or highly structured (W, 544). The world is unified spatially, which has enormous practical consequences for our “motor life.” And things “hang together” in causal chains: in heat conduction, gravity, the transmission of light, and chemical reactions. There are also
colonial, postal, consular, commercial systems, all the parts of which obey definite influences that propagate themselves within the system but not to facts outside of it. The result is innumerable little hangings-together of the world’s parts within the larger hangings-together, little worlds, not only of discourse but of operation, within the wider universe (W, 546).

This is *vertical* scheme pluralism, for the schemes in many ways pass each other by. Electrons don’t find a place in the scheme of the consular service, nor ambassadors in particle physics. James does not here embrace horizontal scheme
pluralism. He describes different systems of handling the world, not different possibilities within one of these systems.

Coming closer to horizontal scheme pluralism and introducing an historical element in his account of knowledge, James next argues that the different purposes and points of view that human beings have on the world make a unified survey of human life impossible:

Men and nations start with a vague notion of being rich, or great, or good. Each step they make brings unforeseen chances into sight, and shuts out older vistas, and the specifications of the general purpose have to be daily changed. What is reached in the end may be better or worse than what was proposed, but it is always more complex and different (W, 547).

This is not Hegelian dialectic. The later stages may be more “complex” but they do not include everything that has come before. Rather, “older vistas” are “shut out.”

James drives home the pluralist point and again sets out a version of horizontal scheme pluralism in discussing narration, the stories we tell about the world. Is there, he asks, just one such story? There are many, he answers, and the telling of one may — although it need not always — obscure the telling of another:

The world is full of partial stories that run parallel to one another, beginning and ending at odd times. They mutually interlace and interfere at points, but we can not unify them completely in our minds. … Even a biographer of twins would have to press them alternately upon his reader’s attention (W, 548).

It is as if each twin’s story, like Wittgenstein’s duck or rabbit aspect, occludes the other. The idea that the world “tells one story” James continues, is a “monistic dogma.” One must “see the world’s history pluralistically, as a rope of which each fibre tells a separate tale; but to conceive of each cross-section of the rope as an absolutely single fact, and to sum the whole longitudinal series into one being living an undivided life, is harder (W, 548). It is harder precisely because even at a moment there is no single point of view from which the “whole rope” is visible.

*Pragmatism*’s chapters on “Common Sense” and “Humanism” continue the development of James’s pluralistic epistemology in far greater detail than in any previous work. “There are many conceptual systems,” he states. These include the categories of common sense, the theories of science, the criticism of philosophy — all of them means of “rationalizing” the “everlasting weather
of our perceptions” (W, 562). To the question “Which of these schemes is the true one” James answers that although each is useful for one sphere of life or another, there

is no ringing conclusion possible when we compare these types of thinking, with a view to telling which is the 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 (W, 569).

This is as clear an anti-reductionist statement as James ever makes.

James holds that our concepts have a history. His pragmatist and Darwinian point is that they survive because of their usefulness in guiding our lives. For example, “kinds” are “colossally useful denkmittel for finding our way among the many. The manyness might conceivably have been absolute. Experiences might have all been singulars, no one of them occurring twice. In such a world logic would have had no application....” (W, 564). Concepts work because of patterns and likenesses among the variety of the world. The concepts pick up the patterns but—James will later argue—precisely because they are designed to pick up what recurs, they cannot track novelty.

In Pragmatism’s chapter on religion, James introduces animal life once more, as an analogy for our own situation in relation to possible higher forms of life. He states:

I firmly disbelieve, myself, that our human experience is the highest form of experience extant in the universe. I believe rather that we stand in much the same relation to the whole of the universe as our canine and feline pets do to the whole of human life. They inhabit our drawing-rooms and libraries. They take part in scenes of whose significance they have no inkling. They are merely tangent to curves of history the beginnings and ends of which pass wholly beyond their ken (W, 619).

We too, James suggests, are “tangent to curves of history of whose significance” we have little inkling. What he comes to call the “pluralistic universe” or “pluriverse” may contain points of view and forms of life that are in some sense greater or higher than our own, and which rarely but dramatically break into our experience (as in religious experience).
4. Late Pluralism

In 1904-5 James published a series of essays, collected in the posthumous volume *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, which set out the view that Bertrand Russell was to call “neutral monism.” It is not my concern to take up the many issues connected with James’s theory here, but simply to take note of a striking pluralistic image James uses to describe the metaphysical position of “the radical empiricist” in the first of these essays, “Does Consciousness Exist?” It is an image of a universe not governed by any one principle, but rather akin to one of those dried human heads with which the Dyaks of Borneo deck their lodges. The skull forms a solid nucleus; but innumerable feathers, leaves, strings, beads, and loose appendices of every description float and dangle from it, and save that they terminate in it, seem to have nothing to do with one another. Even so my experiences and yours float and dangle, terminating, it is true, in a nucleus of common perception, but for the most part out of sight and irrelevant and unimaginable to one another. ... Radical empiricism is fair to both the unity and the disconnection (W, 1162).

James’s assertion that the model is fair to both unity and disconnection ties it to his discussions of pluralism in *Pragmatism*. There is no point of view from which all of this can be taken in, for although there is “a nucleus of common perception,” there are also vast “unimaginable” spaces between.

Four years later James published *A Pluralistic Universe* (1908), where he defines pluralism as “the doctrine that [the universe] is many.” He explains that:

Everything you can think of, however vast or inclusive, has on the pluralist view a genuinely ‘external’ environment of some sort or amount. Things are ‘with’ one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word ‘and’ trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes. ‘Ever not quite’ has to be said of the best attempts made anywhere in the universe at attaining all-inclusiveness. The pluralistic world is thus more like a federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom” (W, 776).

This federal republic, with its more or less independent and diverse parts but also with a central hub, is akin to the Dyak head of the radical empiricist. Again, this is a metaphysical statement, for it is “things” and not just elements of our account of things, which are said to be with one another in various ways. James’s

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wonderful idea that “the word ‘and’ trails along after every sentence” is a reply to Hegel and James’s idealist opponents (and perhaps even to Charles Peirce’s “final human opinion”), who claim to have or at least to wish for, a complete or final system.

The expression “ever not quite” once again signals Benjamin Blood’s presence in James’s thinking, a presence developed most fully in “A Pluralistic Mystic,” a paper about Blood that James published in the year of his death, 1910. James had written about mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, where he emphasizes both the “noetic character” of mystical experiences—their seeming to be a form of knowledge—and their “ineffability”—their inability to be described in language. In “A Pluralistic Mystic,” James observes the tendency of mystical writers to favor some sort of monism, even as they insist that their characterizations are inadequate. He admits to some unease, as a pluralist, in the face of such reports:

The practically unanimous tradition of “regular” mysticism has been unquestionably monistic; and inasmuch as it is the characteristic of mystics to speak, not as the scribes, but as men who have “been there” and seen with their own eyes, I think that this sovereign manner must have made some other pluralistic-minded students hesitate, as I confess that it has often given pause to me.\(^{25}\)

Blood’s mysticism, James continues, though monistic in his earlier works, “develops in the later ones a sort of ‘left-wing’ voice of defiance, and breaks into what to my ear has a radically pluralistic sound. …I feel now as if my own pluralism were not without the kind of support which mystical corroboration may confer.”\(^{26}\)

What is this pluralistic mysticism?\(^{27}\) There are tendencies among the utterances of the mystics, James observes, with some tending more to talk of the One and

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26 Ibid., pp. 374-5.
27 In *The Divided Self of William James*, p. 286, Richard Gale takes James’s pluralism to be theistic. So it sometimes is, as perhaps in “Human Immortality,” where James thinks of God as an other, (but not a dominating and all inclusive other). In emphasizing “the new” rather than God-as-other I am reading Blood and James nontheistically. James’s pluralisms certainly may include these different kinds of plurality.
others, like Blood (or Emerson), of the many or the new. James keeps reverting to the thought that our old concepts can’t quite grasp the particular savor of the new, a point he finds eloquently expressed in a passage he cites from Blood:

The inevitable stales, while doubt and hope are sisters. Not unfortunately the universe is wild—game flavored as a hawk’s wing. Nature is miracle all. She knows no laws; the same returns not, save to bring the different. The slow round of the engraver’s lathe gains but the breadth of a hair, but the difference is distributed back over the whole curve, never an instant true—ever not quite.

James then comments:

“Ever not quite!”—this seems to wring the very last panting word out of rationalistic philosophy’s mouth. It is fit to be pluralism’s heraldic device. There is no complete generalization, no total point of view, no all-pervasive unity, but everywhere some residual resistance to verbalization, formulation, and discursification, some genius of reality that escapes from the pressure of the logical finger, that says “hands off,” and claims its privacy, and means to be left to its own life. In every moment of immediate experience is somewhat absolutely original and novel. “We are the first that ever burst into this silent sea.” Philosophy must pass from words, that reproduce but ancient elements, to life itself, that gives the integrally new.

The quotation from Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and the emphasis on life mark this as one of the many romantic passages in James’s philosophy. Life, as Emerson says, “is a series of surprises,” and though our concepts are good guides to the past, present, and future, something—a “genius of reality” James calls it—always escapes from them. This, then, is a pluralistic mysticism, a pluralism of new, partially connected, never quite describable events. In the third sentence of the citation above James expresses the epistemological (“no complete generalization, no total point of view), the

28 In “Experience” he speaks of “the Newness,” and the word “new” and its variants are plentifully strewn throughout his most ecstatic passages. In “Self-Reliance,” his pronouncement about the “new” is tied up with the present and with an image of plural perception: “It seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on your memory alone, scarcely even in acts of pure memory, but to bring the past for judgment into the thousand-eyed present, and live ever in a new day.” On James and Emerson see Goodman, “Emerson, Romanticism and Classical American Pragmatism.”

29 James, Memories and Studies, pp. 409-10.

30 See Goodman, American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition, chapter 3.
metaphysical (“no all-pervasive unity”), and the mystical (“residual resistance to verbalization”).

James’s concern with the indescribable particular anticipates recent work on the “nonconceptual content” of perception and other mental states.\(^{31}\) James may be understood as maintaining, for example, that reality is more “fine-grained” than our concepts, that, for example, we can distinguish shades of color for which we have no name; and that perceptual states are “unit free” in the sense that we can tell quite precisely how far an object is from us without being having any idea about the units into which that distance may be divided. James’s statement in *The Principles of Psychology* that our experience is originally a “blooming, buzzing confusion,”\(^{32}\) and his later pragmatist account of the ways in which our concepts organize this original confusion anticipate Fred Dretske’s thesis that propositional attitudes are digital and perceptual states analog. James also anticipates contemporary advocates of nonconceptual content in taking animal experience seriously, in suggesting that, as Christopher Peacock puts it, “nonconceptual representational content is part of our animal heritage.”\(^{33}\) James’s claims are not restricted to perception or even to consciousness more generally, however, but extend to the world as a whole.

James was still developing these ideas in his final, unfinished manuscript, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1911). Blood’s “ever not quite” is again inscribed in the text (W, 1055), and the book’s seventh chapter repeats the title of *Pragmatism*’s fourth: “The One and the Many.” James asserts that the alternative between “pluralism and monism is the most pregnant of all the dilemmas of philosophy…” (W, 1040). As in *Pragmatism*, James takes an historical view of our concepts. He argues that they are all provisional, temporary solutions to the problem of making our way through the universe, and he again holds that there is no one such way:

Two thousand years probably measure but one paragraph in that great romance of adventure called the history of the intellect of man. The extraordinary progress of the last three hundred years is due to a rather sudden finding of the way in which a certain order of questions ought to be attacked, questions admitting of mathematical treatment. But to assume therefore, that the only possible philosophy must be mechanical and mathematical, and to disparage all enquiry into the other sorts of

\(^{31}\) See José Bermúdez and Arnon Cahen, “Nonconceptual Mental Content,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

\(^{32}\) James, *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 462. See also Goodman, “James on the Nonconceptual.”

\(^{33}\) Peacocke, “Phenomenology and Nonconceptual Content,” p. 615.
question, is to forget the extreme diversity of aspects under which reality undoubtedly exists (W, 994).

James again asserts that “[c]onceptual knowledge is forever inadequate to the fullness of the reality to be known” (W, 1022). That “fullness,” James insists, is not old; it is new, and its novelty finds no representation in the conceptual method, for concepts are abstracted from experiences already seen or given and he who uses them to divine the new can never do so but in ready-made and ancient terms. Whatever actual novelty the future may contain (and the singularity and individuality of each moment makes it novel) escapes conceptual treatment altogether (W, 1033).

This, once again, is a pluralistic mysticism of the moment, of the evanescent, of the ever not quite. Just as he had tried in the Principles of Psychology to “reinstate the vague to its proper place in our mental life,” James in his later work tries to make room for what is real but ineffable.34

Contemporary Pluralism

This is not the place for a survey of contemporary pluralism, but the fact that such a survey might be done suggests that the term James introduced is still doing a lot of work.35 In the pragmatist tradition we find Nelson Goodman deploying the term in the opening pages of Ways of Worldmaking: “The pluralists’ acceptance of versions other than physics implies no relaxation of rigor but a recognition that standards different from yet no less exacting than those applied in science are appropriate for appraising what is conveyed in perceptual or pictorial or literary versions.” Like James, Goodman rejects scientistic reductions and defends the pluralist claim that there are “contrasting right versions not all reducible to one.”36

Hilary Putnam defends scheme pluralism in Reason, Truth and History, The Many Faces of Realism and Realism with a Human Face. Although he follows Peirce in holding that “a true statement is one that could be justified were epistemic conditions ideal,”37 he does not agree that there must be only one such

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34 James, Principles, p. 246. For a discussion of James’s “self-predication howler” in support of his claims about concepts, as well as “a far more interesting argument” he produces, see Gale, p. 294.
35 See for example Maria Baghramian, Pluralism.
36 Goodman, Ways of Worldmaking, p. 5.
37 Putnam, Realism with a Human Face, p. vii
scheme. Why, he asks in an expression of horizontal scheme pluralism, “should there not sometimes be equally coherent but incompatible conceptual schemes which fit our experiential beliefs equally well? If truth is not (unique) correspondence then the possibility of a certain pluralism is opened up.”

We find pluralism too in the work of another neopragmatist, Richard Rorty: in his emphasis on the contingency of language and self, and in his Nietzsclean conception of pragmatism as “romantic polytheism.” In moral philosophy, John Kekes defends the theses that there is more than one reasonable system of values, and that a plurality of values increases our freedom. And Cora Diamond explores our distance from and intimacy with other animals. James’s pluralisms and their descendents thus seem alive and well, and were Jean Wahl still among us he would have more than enough material for a second volume of Pluralist Philosophies of England and America.

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Bibliography


38 Putnam, Reason, Truth, and History, p. 73. James O’Shea observes that James differs from most contemporary scheme pluralists in his appeal to the conceptually unrepresentable richness of the given....” See his “Sources of Pluralism in William James,” in Baghramian and Ingram, p. 39.


40 See Kekes, e. g., pp. 8, 12 and Diamond.


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