

*A New Look at New Realism: The Psychology and Philosophy of E.B. Holt.* ed Eric P. Charles. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011. 272 pgs. \$44.95.

William James had an emotional impact on many of his students who became prominent in all regions of American culture. Teddy Roosevelt, Boris Sidis, George Santayana. Gertrude Stein and Walter Lippmann. Horace Kallen and Morris Cohen. Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois. James's academic ideas are more at issue in his apprentices who had professional careers in philosophy: for example, G. Stanley Hall, Robert MacDougall, Ralph Barton Perry, Robert Yerkes, and C. I. Lewis. Of this large latter group one of the most talented is regularly overlooked, Edwin Bissell Holt – E.B. Holt.

A number of reasons account for the comparative lack of appreciation of Holt. At the core was that he was a homosexual at a time in American university life when such a preference could easily be devastating to a calling. Holt got his doctorate from Harvard in 1901 at age 28, and taught there until he left in 1918. In 1926 a friend persuaded him to teach one-half time at Princeton, where he remained until 1936. Rumor and innuendo shadowed him for years, and his less eccentric peers were more than happy to ignore and forget him. Holt was also a difficult personality, cynical, sarcastic, and withering in his intellectual scorn for those of lesser ability, and for the pretence so common in higher education. The words of his letter of resignation to Harvard President Abbott Lawrence Lowell in January, 1918, still smoke on the page: “Professors /Ralph Barton/ Perry and /William Ernest/ Hocking are moderately talented young men with whom philosophy is merely a means for getting on in the world. I do not respect them; I will not cooperate with them; and I am happy to be in a position now to wipe out the stigma of being even nominally one of their ‘colleagues’.”

Of the many tributes we may pay to William James one is that he recognized Holt's more-than-rough edges, but at the same time befriended Holt when he was a graduate student on the strength of what James accurately identified as the power of Holt's systematic philosophical vision.

*A New Look at New Realism* does not follow all of trails that Holt took, but it is the first attempt in many years to recall the man to the attention of scholars. The editor,

Eric Charles, has written an ample introduction that provides biographical information about Holt, and locates him in the speculative debates of his era, now a century old. Charles also supplies some primary sources to give us a more immediate sense of Holt and his connections. Just as important, Charles has given free rein to ten contributors to talk about their understanding of Holt and what they make of his work. Overwhelmingly psychological in orientation, these essays concentrate on Holt's commitment to a generous and theoretical experimental psychology. Their strength is that they collectively display Holt continued magnetism in attracting interlocutors.

James and Hugo Münsterberg trained Holt as a philosophical psychologist in the early days of the twentieth century, when the lines between what are now two separate areas of inquiry were indistinct. As James and later Münsterberg moved away from experimentalism and to what I would describe as epistemology and metaphysics, they charged Holt with running the Harvard psychological laboratory. He stayed more a laboratory person than either of his two teachers, although he had a baggy sense of the discipline, most on display in a famous *Social Psychology* course that he developed at Princeton in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The writers in this volume in some respects display a welcome diversity of views. Some report on experimental research that supports Holtian ideas. Some outline Holt's place in the history of psychology. Of especial interest to me are those authors who trace the influence of Holt on his successors. The favored and most significant psychologist here is James Gibson. Formidable arguments are made to demonstrate how Gibson's "ecological realism" is indebted to Holt. In addition, Samuel Alexander and John Anderson, two thinkers with Australian backgrounds, valued Holt's publications and created a crucial tradition of realism in Australia.

Although consideration of Holt's more strictly philosophical ideas is not absent, they receive less notice than the philosophical psychology. Around 1910, as a member of the band of so-called New Realists in philosophy, Holt took direction from two impulses in James's later thought, and again we see how the liberal bent of James's own deliberations stimulated others. Holt took to heart James's onetime allegiance to neutral monism, which premised that mind and matter were constructs from a directly-encountered pure experience. Although Holt eschewed James's pragmatism, the younger

man also imbibed an allied Jamesean notion that cognition did not substantively link mind and the world, but was a form of behavior with which an organism engaged its environment. James and the other pragmatists focused not on cognition, a noun, but on the cognitive, an adjective modifying action; so did Holt.

The philosophical realism of Holt and his collaborators including Perry was labeled new to distinguish it from the old realism, which they attributed to Descartes and Locke. This older Representative Realism postulated that material objects caused images *in* our minds -- the causal theory of perception. From these images we inferred our world; it was “represented” to us by what was in our heads. The reigning Absolute Idealists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had profitably examined the deficiencies of this Representative Realism to credit their own monistic, and mentalistic, stance on reality. The Pragmatists, like Charles Peirce and James, shared many of the opinions of the Absolute Idealists, but were far less certain that human beings could obtain truth. Instead, Peirce and James -- and later John Dewey -- stressed individual methodical knowers, and not a trans-temporal god-like knower. Unlike the Absolute Idealists, the Pragmatists were content with the relative, temporary claims to truth made by scientific practitioners. The New Realists didn’t like the relativism of Pragmatism, but also did not like the mentalism of the Absolute Idealists. In elaborating a third position alternative to Representative Realism, Holt and his then colleagues contended that we had immediate, and not indirect, contact with the real world in perception, and that this world was not ideal in nature. In knowing, object and percept were one. So we got to truth, and it was neither relative to individuals nor in the mind.

The New Realists with proclivities in psychology like Holt thought that experiments would sustain their theories about perception, and that we need not assume an internal intermediary between objects and our bodies. Most of the scholars writing in this volume agree with that New Realist assurance. They -- like the Absolute Idealists, the Pragmatists, and the old New Realists -- find Representative Realism more than suspect. The articles in this volume together effectively delve into Holt’s philosophical position as a New Realist.

Nonetheless, while this position was certainly fundamental to Holt, his grand scheme, expounded in *The Freudian Wish and its Place in Ethics* (1914) and *The*

*Concept of Consciousness* (1915) was not limited to epistemology and physiological psychology. *The Concept of Consciousness* begins with a seventy-five page section on the symbolic logic of E.V. Huntington, A. B. Kempe, Josiah Royce, Bertrand Russell, and Henry Scheffer. Holt had had at least carefully read if not mastered the logical writing of these men when he finished the book in 1908. I do not think he effectively demonstrated how the logic led to the priorities of his New Realism, but at this period in American thought, logic promised dramatic advances in systemic thinking. Aware of the promise, Holt put logic front and center; unfortunately it is hardly touched on in *A New Look at New Realism*.

The first book in print, *The Freudian Wish*, also developed Holt's epistemology, but as the title intimated, the man adhered to a speculative – not to say wild – analysis of rationality. Yet again, we can see the bearing of James on Holt. Holt attended the 1909 conference at Clark University that introduced Freud to the United States and that allowed James to throw his considerable weight behind a less than empirical set of proposals for exploring the human soul. Holt incorporated these proposals into his own thinking, and used them to build a moral philosophy – an ethic of self-realization that claimed objectivity for morality. Holt the moral philosopher is also not investigated in the book under review.

There is a final short-coming, perhaps a hobby-horse of mine, which I want to address. The New Realism was not triumphal. The group of New Realists could not stick together. More significantly, in the ensuing dispute, their scheme was tested. It was not just that they had trouble keeping pace with Dewey's Pragmatism. They were challenged by another kind of realism. The contributors to *A New Look at New Realism* don't spend much time on the virtues of Representative Realism, and imply that what came later was not much different from Descartes and Locke. But this is not so. By 1920, a further company of young doctorates had set themselves in opposition to the New Realism, and these *Critical* Realists made an effective response to Holt. In Roy Wood Sellars and Arthur O. Lovejoy, Holt had perhaps not met his match, but at least he made no effective answer to their assessments. These men, and their companions, reckoned that the outside world caused our experience -- what they designated character complexes, essences, logical entities, or perceptions. But such experiences were not what we perceived, as the

Representative Realists maintained; the experience was rather *the means through which* we gained knowledge of the outside world. Although Critical Realism was a form of indirect realism, its proponents denied the Cartesian-Lockean view of Representative Realism that we perceived only “our ideas.” The New Realists – according to people like Sellars and Lovejoy -- accepted this mistaken outlook but went on to argue, also mistakenly, that these ideas were identical to (a part of) the outside world.

It is not my business as an historian to say who was correct in this discussion, but contemporaries at least awarded some of the laurels to Sellars and Lovejoy. The tradition of Critical Realism remained strong in the work of Wilfrid Sellars, son of Roy Wood; and in today’s followers of Wilfrid Sellars himself. None of these opponents of New Realism in philosophy is recognized in the book, and neither are the experimentalist adversaries of New Realism. Indeed, one might think that Holt was the unacknowledged originator of conquering movements in psychology and philosophy. He may have been the originator, but the movements have been much contested.

Eric Charles has done students of American thought a major service in allowing us to bring back into clearer spotlight the genius who was E. B. Holt. He was not a William James, but Holt did come closest among James’s many devotees to showing the breadth of concern and capacious range of his mentor. My grumble with *A New Look at New Realism* is that its several authors have not valued enough this Jamesian dimension of Holt’s.

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