

Review of Wayne Viney, *William James's Pluralism: An Antidote for Contemporary Extremism and Absolutism*  
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**M**aking full use of his many years teaching psychology and researching William James, Wayne Viney provides a brief and well informed volume on James's *Pluralism*. The emeritus professor at Colorado State University strongly endorses the "beloved American psychologist and philosopher" (viii) for his recognition of the diverse and ever-changing qualities of the world. Both James (1842-1910) and Viney add their adamant critique of the contrast to pluralism, namely monism, as it appears in both the absolutes of theory and in political extremes.

The book exhibits a version of a classic tension. Should pluralism acknowledge the legitimacy of views that are not pluralistic? Doing so maintains theoretical fidelity to pluralism, with its openness to all views, even as that can strengthen monist positions. Those supporters of single grounds for truth are not likely to reciprocate with respect for pluralism, which they dismiss for paying too much attention to the unimportant "litter" of diverse facts compared to "pure and definite" single truths, as James points out (92). By contrast, not acknowledging monism boosts pluralist positions, but leaves monists alienated and ready to dismiss pluralist views. In short, this stance encourages polarization, with each cluster of thinkers rallying to its own worldview and encouraging opposition against the other side.

Challenges with monism and pluralism abound. Such difficult positions are fodder for good philosophical inquiry, albeit also for

abundant cultural tensions. This is why James called the question of “the One and the Many ... the most central of all philosophic problems, central because so pregnant” (PU, 64). Viney wades into these challenges and has produced a book with two souls. He offers “critical scrutiny of all methods,” pluralist and monist, but devotes more energy to promoting pluralism against monism (45).

### **JAMES SCRUTINIZING BOTH MONISM AND PLURALISM**

When facing sharp philosophic disagreements, James had an impulse to respect “the good things on both sides of the line,” as he said late in life (Prg, 14). In his youth, he even said “nothing is true unless with the admission that its opposite is also true” (CWJ, 4:475). At that point, he was torn between contrasting intellectual positions pulling him toward religious and scientific outlooks and toward idealistic and empirical ways of thinking. This was part of his early crises which also included the burdens of ill health, uncertainties about his career, uneasiness about his relations with his family, especially his forceful father, and even doubts about his prospects for marriage. He never fully solved his troubles but turned them to constructive purposes by resolving to make decisions - despite his deep ambivalence - by wading into those uncertainties to learn what he could about the poles of his dilemmas and by making decisive choices despite feeling uncertain.<sup>1</sup> That is the context for his well known resolution to let his “first act of free will ... be to believe in free will” ([Diary 1], Ap[ri]l 30, [18]70, William James Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, [82]). This intellectual posture would lead to his “decisive ambivalence,” a way of acting and thinking that would serve as a template for many of his personal decisions and a framework for most of his theories.<sup>2</sup> In particular, he hesitated strongly for two years about his attraction to Alice Gibbens before they married in 1878; at age twenty five, he was unclear about “the ontological window” through which his father developed his spiritual philosophy, and by age sixty he was respectfully studying such perspectives as subliminal encounters with “the more” at the “mystical window” to the religious “universe outside” of us; and most of his theories include deep reckoning with sharp contrasts, including empiricism and idealism, doubt and belief, a fighting faith and a comforting faith, philosophies based on

objective and subjective experiences, and “tough-minded” and “tender-minded ... mental make-ups.” (to Henry James [Senior], Sept[ember] 5, [18]67, CWJ, 4:195; VRE, 339 and 400; and Prg, 13).

In one of his first professional writings, “The Sentiment of Rationality” (1879), James identifies psychological sources for people’s attractions to different worldviews. Sentiments, based on traditions, feelings, and esthetic attractions, point each thinker toward “a conception of the frame of things,” which then grows elaborately into the rational philosophies or ideologies where that person feels most “at home.” His examples anticipate his later accounts of monism and pluralism: the impulse for “reducing the manifold ... to simple form,” suggests an “essence of things” supporting belief in “the underlying One”; other people, however, feel a “passion for distinguishing” with “impulse to be acquainted with the parts” of experience supporting recognition of plural “particulars in their full completeness” (EPh, 32, 33, 35-36, and 37-38). At this point, when James was just embarking on a career in the new field of psychology, he showed most interest in “the motives which prompt men to philosophic activity,” even as he revealed impatience with the “illusory simplification” of what he would call monism and its “monstrous abridgment” of so much “real matter” (EPh, 360, 54, 55). And with shades of his father’s spirituality and in anticipation of his later religious thought, James found both outlooks limited because “of experience as a whole[,] no account can be given.” For tangible experience, always evading our theories, he was content with “ontological wonder” about the “mysterious ... essential attribute of the nature of things.” (EPh, 62 and 63).

Embarking on his career in psychology, philosophy, and religious thought, while chastened by his humility about the ability for theories to grasp the “muchness” of experience, James explained the role of monism and pluralism for gaining understanding of the world (SPP, 32). In *Pragmatism*, James scrutinizes these orientations, first with “curiosity” because this philosophical contrast presents a “classification with the maximum number of consequences” for ranges of thoughts and choices (Prg, 65 and 64). Then he gives the case for monism a fair hearing about its proposals that “the world is ... one subject of discourse,” with “parts ... hang[ing] together” as shaped by their “first lines of influence”; and

to the monist, “all things without exception eventually could be subsumed” to a common source, and they operate with “unity of purpose,” and are expressed in “one story” and are understood by “one Knower” (Prg, 66-71). He breaks with his patient delivery about views that “the world is one” to say that he finds it “impossible ... to represent” their points clearly, and he even offers a joshing critique of monism by impatiently wondering “why is ‘one’” more excellent than ‘forty-three,’ or than ‘two million and ten?’” (Prg, 65, 74 and 65). Still, remembering his evaluation of diverse temperaments, he recognizes “the authority” that monism “always will possess over some persons” (Prg, 74).

Viney tacitly recognizes James’s “Sentiment of Rationality” in observing that “beliefs ... serve hedonic functions” (54). While James’s purpose is the presentation of a “psychology of philosophizing,” with different sentiments shaping each rational commitment across the philosophical spectrum (EPh, 359), Viney presents his observation as a critique about how the “words of politicians or religious leaders often carry more weight on scientific matters than the words of scientists” themselves. For those endorsing such ideologies, he continues, “loyalties to a system are often inversely related to the rationality of the structures on which the system is based” (54). James evaluates sentiments and rationality in relation; Viney laments their mixture.

Viney also includes some positive references to monism. This philosophy presents “how things ... hang together,” offering clarity and unity when thoughts are confusing (1 and 10). And its message of ultimate unification addresses the “sadness, brokenness, meaninglessness, and fragmentation encountered in the world of experience,” then offers genuine “solace for” the resulting “dislocation and homelessness” (2 and 9). In short, Viney’s support for monism focuses on its appeal rather than its truth to experience. He draws upon James’s terms to refer to the “universe” about the “connections” and hoped for “unities,” and to the “multiverse to emphasize the manyness of things” (6). His view is also a reminder of James’s approach to religious belief in “The Will to Believe” where he offers “a defense of our right to adopt a believing attitude,” with Viney defending the appeal of an attitude philosophic, because in each case, “insight and logic... are not the only things that really do produce our creeds” (WB, 13, 20). Viney also resembles James

with both showing impatience about those who “follow faith unreasoningly” (WB, 7).

#### **DIVERSE ENDORSEMENTS OF PLURALISM BY VINEY AND JAMES**

Wayne Viney critiques monistic philosophies vociferously. Their outlooks are “comforting but misleading,” with “audacious simplistic claims” about any “single avenue to truth” (ix). His coverage includes dismissal of moral monisms; monisms guided by the methods of religion, science, and political ideology; single causal explanations; and monisms based on matter or on ideals, with each claiming the other can be reduced to its chosen “singular reality” (76). He points to the irony of such a diversity of monisms. The belief in singular sources of truth does not extend to agreement about which source to privilege. And with “monistic philosophies” steering people to believe “what to count and what not to count,” they encourage confirmation bias with prior ideas shaping conclusions based on what James calls the power of selective attention to “lay ... its weighty index finger on particular items of experience” (PPS, 381). For all the shortcomings of absolutist monism, James was willing to accept a “belief in the Absolute” as a “moral holiday” when facing “metaphysical paradoxes” or “intellectual inconsistencies” (Prg, 43). In effect, that is a way to describe his “will to believe” in views beyond logic but presenting “genuine options ... of the forced, living, and momentous kind” (WB, 14).<sup>3</sup>

While praising pluralist recognition of diversity encouraging embrace of “genuine novelty,” Viney extends his critiques of monism to its cultural and political manifestations (5). With each focus on “a single story,” these philosophies encourage “stereotypes” about ideas and people. He goes further, calling them “lies and distortions” based on “submission” to authority, even “cult-like ... obedience” (6 and 95). With their absolutism, monistic philosophies point to the “monstrous foreignness and toxicity” of differences, and they encourage their supporters to “anger and violence when their beliefs are challenged” (31 and 29).<sup>4</sup> There is considerable evidence for this throughline from monism’s theoretical absolutism to cultural and political extremism. Viney presents many examples about three pressing moral issues: abortion,

birth control, and death with dignity. In each case, he endorses pluralism for providing “acquaintance [with] ... the multiple experiential and existential dimensions” of the particular people coping with these challenges (33). He argues that monists, by contrast, offer “a decorous simplicity,” and he resents their charge that pluralism promotes a “culture of death” for ending the life of the fetus, as with the case of abortion (43). Viney critiques this “thin and brittle” charge emerging from abortion “taken as a singularity.” Instead, he evaluates abortion in what he calls the “thickness of experience,” with this choice “as a convenience” or because of “an ectopic pregnancy” threatening the life of the mother, and many other reasons based on “deeply personal decisions by women and their families” (31, 32, and 38). Viney argues that monists overlook the nuances of experience with focus on a simple but abstract question, life or death?

With polarization surrounding these and other culturally fraught issues dividing liberals and conservatives, the charges of both Viney and the monists add to the conflict and the resulting gridlock, despite his “hope [for] moderation on all sides” (32). In addition, with Viney choosing one side in these moral debates, there is little room for identifying or responding to what idealist philosophers have called the pluralist sources of extremist politics. Conservatives enlist this argument to accuse liberals of replacing moral absolutes with a diversity of views, which they claim encourages strong leaders to seize power without humane standards.<sup>5</sup> The monist association of pluralism with theoretical and practical relativism is not fully fair but this thinking is part of the plurality of human orientations to the world. James’s approach to pluralism with scrutiny of both pluralism and monism, for all of the shortcomings of his openness, would reckon with these contrasting arguments. James supports his scrutiny of both views by enlisting his observations about the temperamental bases for differing views and about people’s selective attention to different parts of experience. These perspectives offer potential for listening across the differences for evaluation of each for its resources and scrutiny of both for their potential shortcomings—not for solutions but for perhaps some of James’s “meliorism,” with improvements and even persuasion through learning across the polarized tensions (Prg, 137).<sup>6</sup> Viney, however, makes a different choice, with endorsement of pluralism

against monism, which offers potential to rally fellow advocates for pluralist theories and practices. Their contrast points to two paths for addressing disagreement in times of conflict like our own, persuasion to widen support for one's views and advocacy to strengthen the supporters of those views.

Part of Viney's choice is based on his endorsement of modernist culture. He portrays the past as "ages of abysmal scientific ignorance" lacking "the comprehensive reach required in modern theoretical or technical discourse" (47-48). Based on this view of progress with the present as a pinnacle of human civilization, he highlights real achievements, including "pluralism ... consistent with the growth of multiculturalism" enabling people of different races and genders to achieve increased cultural freedom (89). He also praises the "values of viewpoint diversity," which suggests some sympathy for James's observations about the temperamental bases for differing views, even with pluralism versus monism. The modern world has also brought material benefits for sophisticated development and mass consumption of goods and services previously undreamed of, even as these achievements, fueled by scientific and technical insights, have brought massive side effects, especially with environmental damage and increased social inequality. James was concerned about a "future ... when science has become so difficult as to be quite inaccessible to the mass of vulgarians and is ... possessed of unlimited control of natural forces, by means of terrible machines, which ... will keep the world in order by mere terror" (ECR, 329). Viney does not mention these prospective side effects of progress, and he tacitly supports a Darwinian view of modern achievements because "what clearly doesn't work cannot be conserved" (24).

Even with his enthusiasm for science, Viney qualifies his "respect and appreciation" with critique of the view that these successful methods of laboratory and field offer "the exclusive pathway to knowledge" (49). He credits other ways to gain "objective verifiable knowledge about many things" without reliance on science, including "spatial intelligence, ... introspective ... and linguistic knowledge," and even animal "knowledge tied to sensory capacities that humans do not have" (50). This coincides with James's own respect for the different experiences of diverse people, each "one in a million" beyond monistic abstractions and

stereotypes, and he also recognizes thinking in non-human animals: “How different must be the worlds in the consciousness of ant, cuttle-fish, or crab!” (PPS, 277). Viney continues his critique of scientific overreach in citing more variations that emerge from “differences of opinion about what science is” and from “the proliferation of new instruments and new methodologies ... within contemporary science.” These parts of his views of science as “increasingly pluralistic” support the book’s general endorsement of the reality of the world’s multiplicity (50). Like James, Viney supports the methods of scientific inquiry. But James held out skepticism about the results of research investigations, wondering early in his career about how “our formulas indicate a truth but do not reveal it,” before later insisting that “theories ... become instruments, not answers to enigmas” (MEN, 176; and Prg, 32). Instead, Viney maintains confidence in those results from “the salutary interventions of science,” especially to surpass many non-scientific claims from religion and politics (Viney, 52). For Viney, science is not “omni-competent,” but rather is a guide for modern thinking, providing the substance of professional and liberal views about cultural orientations and moral choices.

Viney’s own philosophic orientation is akin to the views of Donald Crosby as expressed in *The Philosophy of William James: Radical Empiricism and Radical Materialism* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2013). When critiquing the most insistent tendencies for materialism and idealism to adopt monist versions of their views, Viney steps back from his dismissals of these reductionist theories to suggest the plausibility of “emergent materialism” for depicting that “mind arises from matter.” This is a view still committed to the materialist type of monism but with recognition of “heterogeneously variable matter” understood to contain pluralist multitudes: “vast unplumbed curiosities and mysteries, ... beneficent beauties and continuing adaptations” (78-79). These monist leanings in Viney are pluralist. Then, with all of his hearty dismissal of monism – with focus on other expressions on monism – Viney still harbors some of James’s own impulses for scrutinizing both monism and pluralism to reap insights deeper than one perspective alone.

#### **AMBIVALENCE, INQUIRY, AND DEBATE**

Viney's book reminds readers that James himself is inconsistent about pluralism. At times, James supports its openness to all views, including monism, but in other places, he endorses pluralism in contrast with monism. His two ways of thinking about pluralism reflect his embrace of ambivalence to enable learning from different views, even contrasting ones. And James's inconsistencies reflect his unblinking engagement with experience in all its robust richness beyond words and theories, even as he was persuaded that pluralism comes closer to faithful descriptions of those rich experiences than do other theories. Viney offers some endorsement of these Jamesian thoughts in his recognition that some monistic accounts of "regularities and practices... work well" (53). That does not make monism a candidate for accurate accounts of reality, but it does offer a way to accept a kind of pragmatic monism, useful for many purposes by pointing to "workable connections" within the pluralism of experience (3).

Viney's fine study of "James' pluralism" is at once a short primer on the pragmatist's own avid curiosity about the richness and depths of contrasting views over monism and pluralism, and an account of James's endorsement of the diverse realities of experience—and a testimony about Viney's own similar preferences for those leanings in James. In making his case for the truth of pluralist approaches to reality and morality, Viney tacitly uses James's own psychology with his insights about the capacity for selective attention to shape each person's own experience based on what they "agree to attend to" (PPS, 380). Viney's own preferences include special attention to James's anti-monistic endorsements of pluralism, with less attention to James's own openness to some monistic position, which he evaluated "not by their [monistic] origin but by the value of their fruits" in lived practice (VRE, 7). With that, this is a sound scholarly book that veers into serving as a personal account displaying its own "difference ... of emphasis" (Prg, 12). With William James's own recognition that philosophical inquiry embodies a sea of contrasting "human temperaments," he would not object (Prg, 11).

ABBREVIATIONS, with original appearance and publication dates in square brackets:

- CWJ *The Correspondence of William James*, 12 vols., Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, et al., eds. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992–2004). Volumes in *The Works of William James*, 19 vols., Frederick Burkhardt, et al., eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975–88).
- ECR *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 1987.
- EPh *Essays in Philosophy*, 1978.
- MEN *Manuscript Essays and Notes*, 1988.
- PPS *The Principles of Psychology*, 3 vols., 1981 [2 vols., 1890].
- Prg *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, 1975 [1907].
- PU *A Pluralistic Universe*, 1977 [Hibbert Lectures on the Present Situation in Philosophy, 1908; 1909].
- SPP *Some Problems of Philosophy*, 1979 [1911].
- VRE *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, 1985 [Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion, 1901–2; 1902].
- WB *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 1979 [1897]

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Paul Croce, “WWJD: Would William James Doubt?” *Streams of William James* 3 (Fall 2001): 15-16.

<sup>2</sup> For explanations about James's "decisive ambivalence," see Paul Croce, *Young William James Thinking* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 26, 245, and 270.

<sup>3</sup> Viney disagrees; he refers to "James's rejection of ... moral holidays" because, as he explains in the context of religious beliefs beyond logic, James could not "rely on the adequacy of some ancient doctrine" to explain "a current technical or theoretical problem" (98 and 102). Viney's position seems to be based on his confidence in scientific insights.

<sup>4</sup> Although written in a different style from Viney's "nontechnical" book (i), Roberto Frega's *Practice, Judgment, and the Challenge of Moral and Political Disagreement, A Pragmatist Account* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012) also applies pragmatist thinking to address deep values differences in theory and practice. While Viney endorses pluralist responses, Frega suggests first "seriously engaging with the beliefs held by others" even with their "variety of normative practices" to understand "what it means to be rational in different areas of moral and political practice" (5, 8, 13). Without these efforts, Frega suggests, "the claim to validity of one's own belief would be no more than a subjective and irrational effort at making one's own way dominate" (84). This describes the paradoxical but often politically effective charge by conservatives that liberal pluralists are intolerant of monistic moral and religious views. Therefore, "in cases of controversies that divide the public sphere into competing and contrasting visions," Frega proposes, not endorsement of a particular outlook, but use of the method of inquiry for rational deliberation about those differing visions and about the resulting differing views about issues (98). Yet Frega also displays confidence that those inquiries will result in positions "that are revisable" and "with reference to the[ir] consequences," outlooks similar to Viney's pluralism (99).

<sup>5</sup> Edward Purcell, Jr., *The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1973), examines the competition between absolutist and relativist thinking in the middle of the twentieth century, with the former charging that relativist lack of

standards encouraged totalitarian strongmen and the latter charging that those dictators ruled with political absolutism.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Croce, in “Learning Across Differences,” Episode 1 of “Healing Our Cultural Wounds” (Public Classroom, 2025), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IT40KWVP-0&t=813s>, accessed January 24, 2026, explores use of James’s ideas to encourage listening across differences.