

**WILLIAM JAMES'S PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL
INFLUENCE ON EDWIN BISSELL HOLT:
A STUDENT, COLLEAGUE, DISCIPLE, AND FRIEND**

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ABSTRACT

E. B. Holt provides a valuable perspective on the professional and personal influences James had on those around him. Holt's professional career started with a class from James, and it ended with a paper dedicated to him. Between those times Holt was as a friend and colleague. Personal correspondences confirm that Holt's personal dedication to James was manifested most strongly in a professional loyalty; he dedicated most of his professional output to seeing through the consequences of James's Radical Empiricism. James was, to Holt, the pinnacle example of the 'whole person.'

This paper will attempt to present William James, as viewed from the eyes of his student, colleague, disciple, and friend, Edwin Bissell Holt. I and others have written about the relation between James's and Holt's professional work in philosophy and psychology (e.g., Charles 2011b, Heft, 2001, Kuklick, 1977, Taylor, & Wozniak, 1996) and more work on that will be forthcoming for some time (I hope). However, I would like to take this opportunity to look more closely at the personal relationship between Holt and James. Because of where that evidence lies, most of the focus will be on Holt, but through Holt we can learn something about the character of James.

Edwin Bissell Holt (1873-1946) was at Harvard for more than twenty years, about half of that time in the presence of William James. Holt began as a student in 1892, and remained there almost continuously until his dramatic departure in 1918. He left academia for a time, and then was persuaded to go to Princeton, where he taught from 1926-1936.

Holt's exposure to psychology began with Philosophy 1 at Harvard, taught by James, using *Psychology: A Briefer Course* (James, 1892). Holt's final publication was a chapter titled "William James as a Psychologist" in the volume commemorating the centennial of James's birth (Holt, 1942). Between those events, the majority of Holt's career was dedicated to James, and thereby Holt tried to explain and extend Radical Empiricism.

HOLT AS A STUDENT

What was it like for Holt in James's course? While we cannot know for sure, we can get a good feel of what class was like from contemporary students. Roswell Angier captures the spirit of the class, and its relation to James's personal style, quite well. In so doing he gives us an idea of how James influenced his student's professional style:

'You have read today's chapter,' [James] remarked from his favorite perch on a corner of the platform desk, holding up to the large class a copy of his *Briefer course*; 'I wrote the book, and what *I* think is all there—but perhaps there is a question.' In such sparrings for openings some debatable issue, perhaps self-initiated, usually bobbed up. He would then become animated and fluent, with rising assertiveness, and throw off with apparent unconcern the verbal picturesquenesses to which his writings have accustomed us. These clarifying interludes were our joy, and James' forte. Positive, even vehement in expression, he none the less impressed us as undogmatic and open-minded, as if science and philosophy were a never-ending but serious game (Angier, 1943, p. 132, recounting events circa 1894).

Ralph Barton Perry also had fond memories of the course, and gives us some idea how the professional agendas of James's more dedicated students were determined by these early influences:

I can remember even the stage-setting—the interior of the room in Sever Hall, the desk with which the lecturer took so many liberties, and the gestures with which James animatedly conveyed to us the intuition of common-sense realism. From that day I confess that I have never wavered in the belief that our perceptual experience disclosed a common world, inhabited by our perceiving bodies and our neighbours (Perry, 1930, p. 189, recounting circa 1896).

After receiving his undergraduate degree at Harvard, Holt receives a master's degree from Columbia University, under James McKeen Cattell. Cattell's approach to psychology differed significantly from James's. While there is no record of Holt and Cattell's relationship at the time, Holt's later disdain for Cattell would be quite explicit.

In 1889, Münsterberg writes James that Holt is returning to Harvard, and notes positively that his "soul has been conquered for philosophy." (Münsterberg, 1899). In 1901 Holt completes his dissertation on "visual anesthesia," a phenomenon wherein people are generally unaware of visible changes that happen while their eyes are making a saccade. During this time, James is away, and Münsterberg, Royce, and MacDougall sign Holt's dissertation.

HOLT AS COLLEAGUE

Later in 1901, Münsterberg writes James to happily report that MacDougall was leaving Harvard, and being replaced by Holt (Münsterberg, 1901). During the first few years of this time, James's influence on Holt is unclear. Elliot is President of Harvard, and when he asks James about the younger members of the department, James recalls a discussion in which Holt

said that “for him [Holt] the profession of psychologist means to be able to work with Münsterberg. If he couldn’t do that, he would become a business man, and give up psychology.” (James, 1904b). Thus, despite James’s early influence on Holt, there is little indication that Holt valued James’s work as distinct from the work of others at Harvard – it should be noted that Münsterberg’s relatively recent appointment was clearly an implicit endorsement from James. There is also little indication that Holt has made a positive impression upon James, at least in the 2 years since James’s return.

THE VALUE OF VACATION

All this changed rather abruptly. Later in 1904, Holt accepted an invitation to join the James family at their vacation home in Chocorua. This seems to be the start of a very positive relationship, as evidenced by James’s personal promotion of Holt in several letters later that year. He writes to Mary Tappan stating, “I walked round the Lake with Holt, who is a most original philosopher as well as a charming human being, none the less so for his violent prejudices in various directions.” (James, 1904c). He writes to Woodbridge stating, “Young Holt... was here while I was writing my article, & we talked it over much. He also disbelieves in Consciousness absolutely, and has an extremely vigorous and original, but to me in many points very obscure system on the literary stocks.” (James, 1904d). The article, presumably, is James’s “Does Consciousness Exist?” (James, 1904a), and Holt’s system is the early rumbling of *The Concept of Consciousness* (Holt, 1914). This indicates that Holt’s work in the preceding years *has* been in line with James’s thinking, though the two are not identical. James writes to Miller, “We had a delightful week from Holt who, with all his injustices and prejudices, is a being wonderful for the heart, and gained all our affections. A much more powerful systematic intellect than I had supposed...” (James, 1904e). Similar praises were sent in letters to Perry and Münsterberg.

The relationship between Holt and James seems to blossom quickly from this point on. The following spring they shared a transatlantic boat trip. Writing back to his wife Alice, James states a desire to expand his friendship with Holt, “I shall be very sorry to lose Holt, who is a very noble creature tho’ decidedly depressed in spirits – I hope you will accustom him to come to the house – if he wants to, but I fear he may not.” (James, 1905a). In fact, Holt became a frequent guest at the James family’s house. The warmth of the relationship between Holt and James is well captured in the jovial nature of their few extant correspondences, even while Holt displays his “decidedly depressed” side. After James and Holt have gone their separate ways in Europe, Holt sends James reports, noting for example that:

Perry is married and gone away on the inevitable honeymoon. These trips must be dismal affairs. I should dread nothing more than the moment when I must learn that my wife travelled with fifty queer looking bottles, twenty-five dresses, and packed her hairbrush and tooth-powder underneath the whole mess. And the chivalrous new husband, disguised as a man of means, is instantly involved by his dove-like wife with sixteen porters, whenever he emerges from a train. I’m thankful I shall never be pestered with a honeymoon. Tom and Rachel are serving their time out in Devonshire (Holt, 1905a).

Holt also thanks James for checking in on his mother, indicating that the relation between the colleagues’ families is extending in both directions.

In addition to a growing friendship, there seems to be growing consensus between the two in terms of the direction psychology should go. Holt and James discussed the beginnings of *The Concept of Consciousness* in 1904, but it would not be completed until 1908, and not published until 1914. As Holt writes James in 1905, it is clear that James believes they are working along the same lines:

There is the quandary as to what I shall call the theory.... you have said that I have my ideas from you, as may well be; and if you care to glance over the sheets when finished, and find that my arguments readily subsume under yours, I will gladly erase "empirio-criticism" all through & put [radical empiricism]. I do think I'm more nearly your disciple than anyone's else in these matters: unless indeed you account it fatal that I can't accept pragmatism in any form. It will depend on what your pleasure is (Holt, 1905b).

The Concept of Consciousness introduces Holt's searchlight and cross-section metaphors for consciousness. There Holt demonstrates a bias he will later attribute explicitly to James, surely the bias being referenced in James's report on their walk around the lake, when he states:

The literature of psych-physical parallelism is one of the most precious farces that modern science presents.... my main purpose has been to show that this mystery concerning the action of the brain is pure buncombe, bequeathed to us by the absurd and in every way impossible representative theory of knowledge." (Holt, 1914, p. 308-310).

THE NEW REALISM

Holt's work on *The Concept of Consciousness* was part of a larger agenda. Starting around 1910, and ending around 1917, philosophy in America revolved around a movement known as the New Realism (de Wall, 2001). I suspect the origins of the movement are quite a bit earlier, however. In 1904, James writes to Perry saying, "We must start a 'school'." (James, September 1904f). Despite his enthusiasm, James also holds some trepidation. In 1905, as his friendship with Holt is just beginning to bloom, he writes Miller to say:

Perry and Holt have some ideas in reserve, but Holt's prejudices make one mistrust them in advance and Perry is close-lipped.... American philosophers, young and old, seem scratching where the wool is short. Important things are being published; but all of them too technical. The thing will never clear up satisfactorily till someone writes out its resultant in decent English (James, November, 1905b).

Two years later, James's view is not much better. He writes President Elliot to say:

We have some very competent younger philosophers in America now, and a few of them write clearly. But their competence is critical wholly, and no one shows any strong originality. I fancy that from that point of view Perry and Holt will pan out as well as anyone (James, July 1907).

While James will not live to see the school mature, he does get to see its birth. Perhaps the first word James had of these events is from Holt. In May 1910, Holt reports back two important events to James: First, at a meeting of Edward Titchener's "Experimentalists" at Johns Hopkins (a precursor to the modern Psychonomic Society), Holt and others have failed to secure James's place as the head of the International Congress of Psychology. With Cattell as the likely alternative, their efforts are now directed at scuttling the conference. Second, at the American Philosophical Association meeting, occurring neig-simultaneously, Marvin, Montague, Perry, Pitkin, & Spaulding have agreed on a shared set of philosophical commitments, and are moving forward with a shared vision. Holt has been invited to join them (Holt, 1910a).

Alas, it is unclear how much of the things to come James could have anticipated.

JAMES'S DEATH

James dies in the late summer of 1910. Holt was despondent: socially, professionally, and emotionally. He writes to friend and colleague Robert Yerkes:

Little has happened to me except the death of Professor James. I returned from Long Island in order to attend the funeral, stayed a few weeks in Cambridge, and have now been a week here [Glennere, Maine]... I feel moderately well, but not eager and wish that this might be my last year of official connection with Harvard (Holt, 1910b).

To Ada Yerkes, Robert's wife:

Your kind letter came in time but I did not use the cheque. The James' would have preferred no flowers: many came and in courtesy had to be displayed. They were sent directly after the service to a hospital. I sent none, at their request, and indeed no-one near enough to the Family to know its wishes sent any: so I enclose your cheque herrwith. I am sure that Mrs. James will be glad to know of your thought, however, and I shall tell her when I have opportunity.

The services were very simple, as is usual at Appleton, indeed more simple than usual, perhaps. I heard very little, the moment was too full of grief. The greatest and best has gone out of my life, and it interests me less than ever to live.

Of the Family I have seen only Billy who arranged all things; assisted Mrs. James to a carriage, and with the mere eye saw the others for a moment. Aleck could not get home from Wyoming in time even for the funeral. They all left, I think, on Wednesday for Chocorua (Holt, 1910c).

REVISE THE BRIEFER COURSE?

Following James's death, Holt begins to sever his ties with Harvard. However, Lowell, who had become president of Harvard the previous year, intervenes to keep him. The deal is that Holt will teach for one semester a year, with the other semester off for writing. In addition to Holt's work with the new realists, which he sees as an extension of James's later work, Holt is quickly enrolled for a Herculean task: To revise *Psychology: A Briefer Course*, the course that first exposed him to psychology, and that was for many years the

most popular text in the field. Holt was the top choice both of the publisher and of the James family. Completing the task would surely gain Holt enduring prestige, would continue to keep James at the forefront of psychology in the minds of another generation of students, and would net a tidy profit for all involved – but none of that mattered to Holt. All that mattered to Holt was his obligation to James, the man. Negotiations with the publisher (Henry Holt and Company, which hereafter will be called Co. to avoid confusion) were tense, especially as the publisher continued to be concerned with monetary matters. As Holt put it to Harry:

I would not for H. H. & Co. touch the text-book in question nor any other, for the sum which they mention nor for any sum which they could possibly afford to name. As often enough comes about, the motive is incommensurate with the money value. Any commercial arrangement between the Publishers and me is, then, out of question; for whatsoever sum I might accept would commit me formally to the declaration that for that sum I was willing to revise the W.J. Text-Book. ... (The Text-Book in question is strictly speaking no such, but an abridgement of a System. We've got to make it into a t.-b., though, more or less.)... My willingness, and eagerness, to do this work is wholly a matter between your Father and me. So far as I might explain this to anyone now living, it would be to say that 'tis in order that the revised form may be the closest possible to what he would have done if he were here. And assuredly if anyone occurred to me whom I thought more likely to carry out that aim, I should apprise you at once and step out myself. Well then, for reasons of my own, which concern nobody else whomsoever, I undertake to act as mouth-piece, and nothing else (Holt, April 1912).

Harry is instructed to handle all financial matters with Co., "My bargain in regard to this work is with him [James], and not with you nor with the Family nor with H. H. & Co. I trust that this is clear." (Holt, April 1912).

Despite disavowing interest in the financial matters, Holt has several more correspondences complaining that the family is not getting a good enough deal from Co. Harry, meanwhile, attempts to convince Co. to pay Holt more, even offering to take money out of the family's cut, as long as Co. promises not to tell Holt where it came from. Eventually it is revealed that the family owns the copyright to the works, not Co., at which point Holt claims the terms to be fair, and talk of money dies out. The correspondences turn to the form of revision and other more mundane matters (Henry Holt Archives).

HOLT LEAVING HARVARD

In 1918 Holt sends in a short letter of resignation. Multiple people, including President Lowell ask him to stay. Holt declines, but believes Lowell has a right to know his complaints, particularly about the state of the Department and the University. Explaining his early love of the place, Holt singles out that "In those days I had Professor James to look up to." The problem now is that:

I made one observation in the psychological market-place, which has been of interest. Even the professed searcher after truth must of course look out for his own practical interests: but it makes all the difference in the world which of these considerations he puts first. And every man has to choose,

because the day surely comes when these two interests will appear to him to conflict. I discovered that... if a man won't put truth first, then he needn't bother to put it anywhere: for it will not go second, though a slight difference at the outset, soon becomes the great difference between the honest and sober scientist to whom some little truth will surely be vouchsafed, and the full-fledged charlatan.

Anyhow there are some absorbing problems, and I shall go on to devoting my very ordinary powers of mind and body to the work that I have begun here at Harvard or, to speak more exactly, under the late Professor James (Holt, 1918).

The rest of the letter is quite venomous, as Holt is clearly disgusted by what Kuklick (1977) called the “professionalization of philosophy” and the professionalization of academia more generally. This disgust is grounded in his understanding of what James stood for as a philosopher and an academic. Months later, while discussing contemporary psychologists with E. B. Titchener, and labeling them after “great psychologists” of the past, the topic turns to identifying “epigone,” which are (roughly) disciples who continue to advance. In this context, James is identified as an observer-systemtizer, and Titchener asserts that Holt is “a James.” Holt explains that:

I do not think of Wundt and James as being preeminently observers (strange as it may seem to intimate that James is a systematizer. Yet so I do. And perhaps “theorizer” would be an apter word.)

For me Freud is a mighty observer (but as a theorzier – thought I hate to apply to him such a term – a jackass. I believe that the two gifts are never combined)... Wundt... is not a genuine thinker – he does not consult facts, he martials then á son gré et comme lui bon semble. A vast difference!

Why don't you call me a little James?

Holt also confesses that he:

Has resolved to no longer “invite discussion”... a philosopher's converse must be altogether in the indicative mood. And every dispute or effort to proseyltize involves implicitly something that is over and above the indicative mood. And I repose peacefully in the assurance that any idea of mine which may be true cannot be impeded by other man's attacks: while any that may be in error I desire to see attacked and overthrown. Since the universe attests all truth. I do not worry lest truth should not prevail (Holt, January 1919).

MORE ATTEMPTS AT REVISION

Retired to Maine, Holt refocuses his efforts on revising the *Briefer Course*. Quickly he runs into conflict with the Co. over all the issues he had made clear to them earlier. The Co. desires a quick update to sell more books, Holt wants to be James's mouthpiece. In that spirit, Holt insists that he must take all reference to consciousness out of the book. In place of that lost material will go James's radical empiricism. The walk around the lake that James spoke so

highly of is still clearly on Holt's mind, as well as James high ideals in placing truth first.

I shall have to do this if I revise the work at all: - firstly, because that will present the only picture of psychology which would be a true one: secondly, because I am convinced that if Mr. James were revising the work himself his first care would also be to make it utterly "radical empirical." Whether I should do this in the way that he would have done it, I cannot know. For he left no directions as to how to take "consciousness" out of psychology: and no hints, beyond the general animus of his later work on Pragmatism and Radical Empiricism (Holt, March 1920a).

To this letter, Holt attaches Chapters I, II, and V to make sure Harry and Co. understand what he is doing. Harry thinks it looks good, and understands the goal. He writes back, with surprise, "What you are doing is going to be a reconciliation of the position occupied by my father at different times." (H. James, 1920a). The publisher is less impressed. In May, Holt receives his chapters back, but states that they look very bad (Holt, 1920b). That is the last correspondence regarding the revision, and no record of the chapters remain. While some ideas of what Holt had in mind can be constructed from his later works, the relationship between Holt's and James's ideas is a story for another time (Charles, 2010).

Also of note during this time is Holt's correspondence with Henry regarding the *Letters of William James* (H. James, 1920b). Holt sends a small collection of letters noting that he considers them his most valuable possessions. When Henry returns them, he apologizes that there was not room to include them in the publication, but unsuccessfully urges Holt to send them to the James Archive at Harvard for preservation (H. James, 1920c).

HOLT'S LATER WORKS

Holt returns to academia, to a post at Princeton, which he held from 1926 to 1936. While there he writes his final book and a handful of articles. The book in particular is worth noting here, as well as Holt's final academic publication, a book chapter published several years after Holt retires to Maine for the final time.

ANIMAL DRIVES

The book is Volume I of *Animal Drives and the Learning Process: An Essay Toward Radical Empiricism* (Holt, 1931). In this work, Holt is clearly still trying to repay his debt to James. Alas, Volume I focuses on issues of physiological psychology, and so the connection to James work seems tenuous at best. Regarding James, Holt tells us that Radical Empiricism is:

a way of thinking which aims to escape, both in philosophy and in psychology, from the absurdities of subjectivism and any form of psych-physical parallelism... 'consciousness,' the metaphysical entity, does *not* exist; that it is merely the last lingering echo of the primitive ghost-soul. Conscious phenomena of course exist, [James] said, and the problem of cognition exists, but not mental *substance*... (p. v)

Volume II will include the relation between *mind* and *reality*. As at the outset we are brought face to face with the question, whether a ‘radically’ empirical and physiological psychology is necessarily ‘materialistic,’ so at a later point we shall need to consider the very categories, ‘mind,’ ‘matter,’ and ‘reality,’ as psychological phenomena.... The study of the conscious process (psychology) and the study of the knowing process (epistemology) cannot be kept apart if both are taken seriously. (p. vii)

Alas, Volume II never appears. Thus, the connection between the physiological material in this book and the agenda of radical empiricism (at least as Holt understood it) remains difficult to discern. While James’s writings included things learned through physiological investigation, it seems odd that a man who claims to be dedicated to continuing James’s legacy would think that the best way to proceed was to write a book-length treatment of the subject.

JAMES AS A PSYCHOLOGIST

In 1942, Holt writes his final professional work. It is for a symposium commemorating the 100th anniversary of James’s birth, published in a volume commemorating the same. Here Holt lays out who William James was professionally, and in so doing Holt lays out the way James’s example has been a guide to him, and an unattainable goal. Perhaps the most important thing to note about James’s professional life is that James-the-professional is in no way a separate entity or personality. Second is that James is not afraid of the world, he is willing to engage all that there is, avoiding nothing. In his writings,

James admits the reader to his workshop; where he, the whole man and untrammelled by academic mannerisms, is examining the facts, all the facts and all appearances that present themselves as facts, and trying to find for them some intelligible arrangement. There is no window dressing. Inconvenient items are not banished into corners to get them out of sight. And where outstanding contradictions exist, there they are, exposed to view (p. 34).

The chapter is rich in its portrayal of James’s overarching ambitions, and without knowing of Holt’s past and his work, it might be easy to miss that it is a rich portrayal of the work he has taken it as his mission to complete. Holt tells us that the one seemingly inescapable contradiction in psychology is that, “The mind seems dependent on the body while the mind seems independent of the body.” (p. 35). James never fully solved this problem (Holt asserts), but he made major inroads, and most importantly, he did not flinch from engaging the apparent contradiction; rather, James worked to expose the contradiction fully, with all consequences laid bare. Whereas psychologists and philosophers at the time, and most to this day, try to artificially cleave the problem – with philosophers handling the non-physical mind, and psychologists handling the physical – James steadfastly felt that any facts about the mind found by the philosopher must be reconcilable with facts discovered by the psychologist, and vice versa. That is, according to James, the fundamental seeming-contradiction in psychology can only be overcome if we accept that: “The problem of knowledge is identical with the problems of physiological psychology.” (Holt, 1942, p. 35). With that statement, it becomes immediately clear why Holt thought his *Animal Drives* was so important in continuing James’s legacy.

The remainder of the essay cobbles together quotes from James's works, with between-quote narration providing additional context. Though clearly altered to fit the context of a memorial volume, it likely gives good format and content Holt planned for the first few chapters of the ill-fated revision to *A Briefer Course*. There is coverage of Radical Empiricism, Pragmatism, and an attempt at back-integrating James's latter thoughts with material from *Principles of Psychology*. Reflecting Holt's disavowal of pragmatism, the discussion of that subject is perhaps more awkward than the rest. That said, it still demonstrates a nuanced understanding of James's work in those regards.

CONCLUSION: WHO WAS JAMES?

The purpose of this paper was to give a sense of who William James was to a close friend, Edwin Bissell Holt. Holt knew James best near the end, and was connected with him both professionally and personally. Who was James to Holt? Personally, James was a mentor and an exemplar, an encourager and a nurturer, a concerned and generous friend. Professionally, James was a Seeker of Truth, a courageous systematizer-theorist, perhaps the last of his kind on such a grand scale. James was the type of person who invoked fierce loyalty. Further, that James lived his personal and professional lives inseparably, made it impossible for those he touched most strongly to live separate personal and professional lives; or at least that was its effect on Holt.

Perhaps most importantly, however, James was painfully unattainable. Holt's inability to deliver what he sees as James's unfinished legacy to philosophy and psychology clearly haunts him to his end. This was not just a practical or professional failure, but a personal one. Holt is not the type of person to become overly frustrated by an inability to write a particular this or that: Neither in the academe, on trips to Europe or California, nor in his idealized forced-isolation of retirement could Holt make himself into *the person* capable of finishing James's contribution.

In these regards, the importance of Holt's assertion that philosophy requires the dedication of the "whole person" cannot be overemphasized. Holt's (1915) *The Freudian Wish and Its Place in Ethics* takes Freudian theory both to the microscopic level of physiology and the expansive level of ethics. Holt builds on the implicit ethics in Freudian psychology, that life is best lived without suppression. The problem with suppression, Holt demonstrates, is that a person cannot fully work towards something, if they also are working against it – a person harboring suppressions is not fully free to pursue any path. This book contextualized Holt's statement that James dedicated his whole person to his work. No greater complement could be given. To be able to dedicate one's whole person to a task requires a purity of intention virtually impossible to obtain. Only people capable of such dedication have free will, and only they have the ability to be fully ethical beings. James was such a person for Holt.

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