

The Experience of Pluralism

SCOTT L. PRATT

University of Oregon

In this paper I begin the task of answering the question “what is pluralism?” The importance of the question may be obvious in the present world. Some have argued, for example, that the world might not be trapped in war if the U.S. administration had understood the character and implications of pluralism. If pluralism means anything like a concept that explains the differences among things, events, and ideas in human experience, especially differences that involve conflict, then the concept might provide a key to addressing the issues that are at the center of the present situation. Yet, the fact of war seems to suggest to others that pluralism is not an intractable philosophical puzzle but is more strictly a matter of conflicting interests, confusion, and stubbornness. From this perspective, it is natural to conclude that, in the face of violent conflict, pluralism simply marks a situation to be overcome by eliminating the differences.

In the philosophical tradition, pluralism has most often been understood literally: “more than one” or as the claim “there are many things.” This is in contrast to monism, also literally taken: one or “there is one thing.” Even the apparent simplicity of Latin roots gives way to ambiguity, however, when one wonders what “things” are in question. The result is a plurality of pluralisms. Does pluralism claim that there are many material things such as we apparently encounter in our daily activities? Or are the “many things” individuals more broadly understood: individual organisms, individual human beings, or individual nations? Or are they categories or classes? While various realists might claim that pluralism is found in the reality we encounter, skeptics and Kantians would probably argue that claims about a pluralism of “things” say more than we can reasonably conclude given the limits of our engagement with the world. In this case, pluralism would be better confined to a view about what we know or claim about the world.

One way that the variety of pluralisms has been organized is by recognizing both ontological pluralism, the idea that there are many “real” things, and epistemic pluralism, the idea that there are many “knowledges” (systems of knowledge or ways of knowing).¹ Though it is difficult to keep the distinction sharp, the categories at first appear useful; the work of philosophers such as Leibniz, Spinoza, the British Empiricists, and the classical pragmatists can all seem to be classified along these lines.²

Of course, this propensity to classify philosophers already accepts certain principles that themselves may need more careful consideration. The received distinction between epistemic and ontological pluralism makes sense of some aspects of our experience, but it clearly misses other important aspects. Epistemic pluralism makes sense because it recognizes the role of perspective (as well as culture and interest) in experience and the process of inquiry.³ Ontological pluralism makes sense because it recognizes the experience of differences so sharp that they cannot be the product of mere human construction.⁴ In the end, this approach focuses on the things taken to be plural, knowledge or worlds. I will argue that this manner of understanding pluralism is a mistake, though the idea of beginning with experience can lead to a more adequate conception of pluralism.

Consider the comparison of Islam and “modernity” proposed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. For Nasr, the “world of Islam” and the “modern world” are irreconcilably different. At the center of the difference are contrasting conceptions of human nature. Islam, Nasr argues, adopts the conception of “*homo islamicus*” in which human beings are properly understood as “the slave[s] of God (*al-‘abd*) and His vice-regent[s] on earth.”⁵ As such, *homo islamicus* “rules over the earth,” but, as God’s vice-regent, also “bears responsibility for the created order before the Creator.” To carry out this role, human beings possess reason but also “the possibility of inward knowledge, the knowledge of his own inner being which is key to the knowledge of God.” In contrast, Nasr holds that the “modern” conception of a human being is “an animal which happens to speak and think,” who is “purely an earthly creature, master of nature, responsible to no one but himself.” These contrasting conceptions of human nature, Nasr argues, cannot be “harmonized.” This is well illustrated by claims about the origins of life. The theory of evolution, a view compatible with the notion of human nature held by “modernism,” holds that human culture and activities are properly understood as a product of a particular process of chance and selection and humanity’s autonomy is a consequence of the lack of an end or purpose other than human purpose. The Islamic conception—whether one accepts some form of biological development or not—nevertheless recognizes the role of purpose and the context of “higher states of being and the archetypal realities which determine the forms of this world.”

One way of reading Nasr’s discussion is to see him as offering an epistemic pluralism as a starting point for understanding the conflict between Islam and the so-called Modern West. The conflict centers on two alternate sets of knowledge claims about a single world where if one set of the claims is true, then the other is false. The conflict in principle will be decided by the way the singular world really is. In this case, the separation between knowledge and ontology is sharp—knowledge is not constructive in any way of the world in question and the ontology is antecedent to the knowledge claims about it.⁶ Yet if experience is the starting point for understanding, the idea of epistemic pluralism, at least in cases like Nasr’s, is inadequate.

The key to giving an adequate account of pluralism will begin with the actual experience of differences. In the face of conflict between a Muslim believer and one who believes in modern science, epistemic pluralism simply reasserts that the views one encounters are to be taken as correct, but are also incompatible. Pluralism, in this sense, marks the experience of conflicting views, some of which must be dismissed. Is this the experience of pluralism? In fact, the ability to reassert a set of claims in contrast to some other view suggests that the experience of the conflict is not, at first, one of sharp separation between views. For a non-Muslim to read Nasr's account of an Islamic conception of the world, she must grasp at least something of the view even as the engagement is characterized by doubt or confusion. For there to be a conflict among views, there must be some recognition that the claims are at odds so that even the most sharply opposed interlocutors must at some level listen to each other. Whether one ends up in conflict or agreement, the engagement begins when one tries on the view, feels its strangeness, imagines its consequences. This first experience of differences, marked by the qualities of strangeness, disconnection, engagement, and anticipation, is not the same as the epistemic pluralism that pulls us out of the engagement and sets the knowledge claims on different sides of a sharp divide.

From the perspective of epistemic pluralism, we could say that we indeed recognize the different views and so affirm a kind of pluralism, but we also recognize the differences that give rise to the divergent knowledge claims as a passing phase. Organizing the initial experience of differences as one that will be resolved by ontological monism is a view that has already rejected a pluralism in which the ontology is not settled. The problem is that what I have called epistemic pluralism has ignored the character of the experience of differences. The experience, at least in its first moments when we try to grasp what someone claims, is the experience of an unstable world. If such encounters as the one mapped by Nasr are recognizable moments of the experiences we would like to understand, then epistemic accounts of pluralism seem to miss the mark.

Another way of reading Nasr's example is in terms of some sort of ontological pluralism. Perhaps Nasr would argue that both sets of knowledge claims hold. In this case, the worlds they describe would be fundamentally incompatible (the world of Allah cannot be the world of Einstein). Neither set of knowledge claims can be revised in terms of the other (or some common world) and so in the experience of differences, one is left with a kind of incoherent and endless estrangement. Since nothing escapes Allah on one hand or Einstein on the other, those who live in one world must be forever lost to those who live in the other. Is this a more adequate accounting of the experience of pluralism?

If the qualitative strangeness that characterizes the encounter is an element of the experiences we call pluralistic, explaining this strangeness as a matter of distinctly different worlds might be useful. When I travel to a place where the language, the smells, the colors, and the landscape are different from what I am used to, my first experience is disorienting. As I live in a new place, I learn about

it, sometimes in terms of what I knew before, but often in terms that require that I set aside my old ideas. Nasr's case is more extreme, but the pluralism he implies might best be understood as a sharp ontological separation of worlds. The problem here is that the truly sharp separation between "worlds" would seem to say that what I knew about one world can provide no help in the new world. Strictly speaking, I could not even know that I was in a new world since my only resources for knowing are inextricably bound to the world I come from. Just as Donald Davidson dismissed the idea of conceptual schemes in light of the fact that we can recognize divergent knowledge claims, should we also dismiss the idea of separate worlds as untenable in light of the fact that we can experience different places?

When I encounter someone for whom the world is the consequence of the will of Allah, experience suggests that some things are nevertheless apparent to both of us and together seem to be real aspects of a common world. Even my first experience of Nasr's view, to the extent I recognize it as a view making claims about the world of my experience, suggests some common ground. If I set aside the experience of disconnection, it is easy for me to arrive again at the idea that our differences are epistemic and not ontological. The reductive potential of epistemic pluralism counters the apparent irreducibility of ontological pluralism that emerges from experience. And just as experience undercuts the potential of reducing differences to a single world, the experience of engagement across ontological divides seems to undercut ontological pluralism.

A good reason to be skeptical of the division between epistemic and ontological pluralism is that both kinds seem to be present in experience. Nasr's account of *homo islamicus* is understandable despite its differences from the idea of *homo sapiens*. The differences are experienced not simply as a matter of alternative knowledge claims, but as an interaction with something "really" different. The experience of pluralism seems to contain elements of both plural knowledges and plural realities in a way that leads from epistemology to ontology and back. The initial attempt to say what pluralism is by categorizing its varieties seem to direct attention away from the character of the experience of pluralism to ways of overcoming the differences. A better approach starts from experience.

William James, the consummate psychologist and phenomenologist, began with the "experience of pluralism" and asked what it entailed. In the preface to his collection *The Will to Believe*, James asserts "*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" (1897, viii). Put another way, experience presents human beings with a world of variety. It is part of the effort of human reflective life to make connections among these things, even if only for the practical purposes of identifying means of further living. The question is how best to characterize the pluralism of experience. Is it finally a collection of diverse things, independent of each other and subject to collection by the "higher thinking" of humans? Or is that first pluralism best understood

as a raw material to be assembled by human minds such that what is real is best understood as ideas rather than things in themselves? Although James in many ways remains vague about his answers to these questions, he does provide a crucial starting point from which to understand how we might best understand pluralism. In his incomplete last book, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, James concludes: “pluralism need not be supposed at the outset to stand for any particular kind or amount of disconnection between the many things which it assumes. It only has the negative significance of contradicting monism’s thesis that there is absolutely *no* disconnection” (1911, 115). On this view, pluralism “stands for” the claim that there are “some disconnections.” The claim is general enough that it would seem to apply equally to epistemic and ontological concerns. Its implications, however, are not so clear.

On one hand, the claim that there are some disconnections simply means that there are things that are disconnected from each other. Whatever unifying connection (category or substance) we pick, pluralism would assert that there are some things that escape the connection, that are, in effect, really disconnected or outside whatever the whole category or substance is taken to be. On the other hand, the claim of pluralism does not rule out the claim that there are also some connections. While one might argue (with atomists or liberals) that within some relevant categories there are no connections, such an assertion seems, at least on the surface, problematic. Any category, material or personal, to the extent it is a category, carries with it the claim that there are at least some connections.⁷ The key to James’s assertion of pluralism is not a challenge to the possibility of connection, but a challenge to the denial of disconnection. In effect, for James, things (whatever they might be) must be understood to be *both* connected to and disconnected from other things. The general claim that all is one must fail just as the claim that everything is independent must also fail.⁸

This notion of pluralism, however, seems to smuggle in enough ontology to make us wonder whether James is serious about his claim. After all, the central point is that *things* are sometimes connected and sometimes disconnected from other things. If nothing else, *that there are things* seems to be required in the first place in order to make pluralism possible. But consider the claim that there are things. Presumably by this we have some notion of objects (or whatever) that are what they are because they manage to stand for themselves somehow even as they relate to other things of the same sort that they are not. Contrary to James’s pluralism, thingness itself seems to be a mode of connection that is universal. Can we at least reject pluralism as it applies to things as mere things? That is, can we claim that whatever is, is at least connected by the category of being a thing? To take James seriously (whether he would have himself or not), I conclude that pluralism must apply here as well in the sense that, as James says, “Something always escapes” (1909, 321), that is, even the most general category or mode of connection is not complete. Despite the etymology of “something,” I suspect what James has in mind here is the idea that no category or substance

encompasses the universe—there is never an actual totality.⁹ If this is so, a universe of things does not have a finished character in which all the connections and all the disconnections are in place.¹⁰ In a way, this conclusion squares with our expectations about what James calls a pluralistic universe. As a universe, whatever there is stands in relation to other things—everything is connected to something. As pluralistic, however, nothing is connected to everything—there are gaps and fringes throughout.¹¹

James's pluralism marks both connection and disconnection and, perhaps, one more thing: if things are never in isolation, then whatever thing we choose is what it is in virtue of the complex of connections and disconnections that frame it. Epistemically, this is the import of the Peirce's pragmatic maxim: "Our idea of anything *is* our idea of its sensible effects" (2.401). Ontologically, this is the import of James's world of pure experience: "*the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as 'real' as anything else in the system*" (1977, 195; italics in original). The force of these claims is that no thing has effects or acts in isolation.¹² The pragmatist conclusion was summarized by Dewey as the "postulate of immediate empiricism": "things are what they are experienced as" (1983, 158). For pluralism, it means that things are not independently what they are, but are what they are in the context of their interactions (connections and disconnections) with other things.¹³ On this view of pluralism, what is important is not that things are what they are in isolation, but in the character and progress of the connections and disconnections in which things emerge and dissolve.

I began by considering the proposal that pluralism could be understood as a matter of plural knowledges or plural ontologies. While this approach is perhaps useful for developing a taxonomy of philosophic positions, it fails to connect with experience. James's pluralism, in contrast, asks that we shift our theoretical focus from completed things in isolation (either as a whole or as individuals) and instead focus on the interactions, the connections and disconnections, in terms of which things are what they do. When writing about consciousness, James observes that it consists of both "flights and perchings" (1900, 160). The common tendency in theory is to focus on the perchings, the settled idea and characteristics by which we know ourselves and others. An adequate theory of consciousness, however, must attend as well to the flights, the transitions from one settled moment to another. Similarly, pluralism can be seen as a focus on the "flights," the interactions between things. "For pluralism," James concludes, "all that we are required to admit as the constitution of reality is what we ourselves find empirically realized in every minimum of human life. . . . Nothing real is absolutely simple, that every smallest bit of experience is a *multum in parvo* [much in little], plurally related, that each relation is one aspect, character, or function, way of its being taken, or way of its taking something else; and that a bit of reality when actively engaged in one of these relations is not *by that very fact* engaged in all the other relations simultaneously" (1909, 322). While James himself argues that pluralism is a

view that emphasizes the “each-form” over the “all-form,” the view nevertheless encompasses *both* unity and diversity (34, 324–26).

A pluralism framed by James’s insights can recognize the value of the epistemic and ontological approaches because they respond to aspects of experience. But the starting point, the experience of pluralism, also exceeds and undermines these approaches. Experience necessarily involves both connection and disconnection. These factors provide the ground for both a great diversity of experience, knowledge, culture, and worlds, while also bounding the possibilities and providing a means of judgment. Though I cannot defend the conclusion here, it is our very experience of these differences that can provide the means to understand and coexist with other people and their worlds.

Consider again Nasr’s account of the irreconcilable conflict between Islam and the West. What does not emerge in his account is the experience he enacts and in which his readers engage. The very effort to chart division requires the emergence of an experience between the knowledge and worlds in conflict. While some Muslims live their lives in a world created by Allah and some scientists live solely in a world described by Einstein, Nasr marks the intersection of these worlds. As an experience of the reader, the engagement presents recognizable claims that bring doubt and confusion. With Nasr, the reader struggles to resolve the conflict even as the worlds they encounter resist reduction. James’s pluralism requires that we attend to the encounter itself. Rather than seeing the interaction as a passing phase without theoretical interest, the interaction marks the points at which the settled worlds literally become unstable and give rise to new possibilities. The worlds that exist outside of one another’s experience intersect in a range of conflicts and are taken up by Nasr, whose work reconstructs the conflict in ways that make new interactions possible. While epistemic and ontological pluralisms mark aspects of human experience, pluralism is better understood as a matter of what lies between, the boundaries that mark interaction and the possibility of growth and change.

Notes

1. Earl R. Mac Cormac presents one version of this taxonomy (1990, 411–20). Walter Watson offers another taxonomy in which he identifies four categories of what I would call epistemic pluralism and associates each with particular ontological stands (1990, 350–66). Amelie Oksenberg Rorty offers a different taxonomy (1990, 3–20), which emphasizes a variety of epistemic positions and does not discuss explicitly the variety of associated ontological positions.

2. Leibniz represents a classic example of an ontological pluralist who is an epistemic monist about his pluralistic system. Spinoza, in contrast, is an ontological monist who presents an epistemic pluralism. Empiricists of the British sort can be seen as epistemic pluralists in that diverse individuals are made so by the distinctive knowledge they gain from their particular sense experience. Some empiricists, such as Berkeley, are epistemic pluralists and ontological monists, while others, Hume, for instance, are epistemic pluralists and try to avoid making claims about ontology (though the attempt seems to fail). Some would hold that, like Hume, pragmatists are epistemic pluralists but would be either ontological monists (holding that there is a single real world into which we inquire) or would

be ontologically indifferent (what matters is inquiry and its projects and no claims about being are required). For a somewhat different historical survey, see Reck (1990, 367–87).

3. See Harding (1998) for an example of epistemic pluralism.

4. See Goodman (1978) for an example of ontological pluralism. Goodman also shows the difficulty of making the epistemic/ontological division since diverse worlds are products of human activity.

5. All quotations are from Nasr (2003). Also see Nasr's more systematic survey, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (2000).

6. There are a great variety of pragmatist arguments against this presumed sharp separation, but for present purposes, the interesting thing about the separation is that what is plural (the conflicting knowledge claims) are subject to the monist ontology of a single reality that will sort out the various claims. On this approach to pluralism, different sorts of knowledge claims mark a passing phase that, at least in principle, will be overcome by what is "real." Since plural knowledge claims are always passive in relation to monist ontology, those who disagree about the nature of the world can be confident that a resolution is in principle possible.

7. To say, for example, that among the collection of all autonomous individuals there are no connections whatever, would seem to rule out the possibility of interaction at all, let alone universal principles.

8. The character of connections for James is best understood in terms of the notion of continuity. See James (1909, lecture 7). Also see Peirce (1992, lecture 8).

9. The notion of an "actual totality" relates James's discussion to the ongoing logical controversy about whether or not a system can be complete in itself. Bertrand Russell argued that there could not be a totality (at least if the system was set theoretic) and so proposed the theory of types to address the problem. Josiah Royce agreed with the problem, but drew different conclusions (1951, 375–76). Also see James (1909, 34).

10. This is the claim that if for all x , x is a thing, then there is some other y that is not a thing; that is, there is a y that is not included in the universe of things.

11. This formulation raises the possibility of some range of things, α , such that they all satisfy the requirements of the formulation (that is, they are connected to something and not connected to everything), and another range of things, β , that also satisfy the requirements, but where there is no member that is connected to other members of both α and β . The result would imply the possibility of two completely separate "worlds." The theory of continuity (mentioned in note 8 above) provides a means for ruling out such a situation

12. For idealists of James's time, this conclusion was a variation of the "ego-centric" predicament that led to the declaration that everything is only in mind. Peirce adopted a version of this idealist claim (that everything is mind) in his series of papers in *The Monist*. The ego-centric predicament later became the central issue in the rise of "New Realism" and the demise of idealism as the dominant philosophical position in the North American academy.

13. Some use the term "transaction" in a way similar to the way I use "interaction" here. While these terms are similar, it is interesting to note the differences in the meanings of the prefixes. "Trans-" carries the sense of "across, through, over, to or on the other side of, beyond, outside of, from one place, person, thing, or state to another" (OED). In contrast, "inter-" has the sense of "between, among, amid, in between, in the midst" (OED). As a result, "trans-" suggests the movement of something from one place or state to another while "inter-" suggests that something new emerges between two or more things. The choice of terms here may not be crucial, but I will use "interaction" to name the process that determines the character of things since it highlights "between-ness" and the importance of the boundary in making things what they are.

Works Cited

- Dewey, John. 1983. "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism." In *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 3, ed. J. Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP.
- Goodman, Nelson. 1978. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis: Hackett.

- Harding, Sandra. 1998. *Is Science Multicultural? Postcolonialisms, Feminisms, and Epistemologies*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- James, William. 1897. *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*. New York: Longmans, Green & Co.
- . 1900. *Psychology: The Briefer Course*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- . 1909. *A Pluralistic Universe*. New York and London: Longmans, Green, & Co.
- . 1911. *Some Problems of Philosophy*. New York and London: Longmans, Green, & Co.
- . 1977. *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott. Chicago: U of Chicago P.
- Mac Cormac, Earl R. 1990. "Metaphor and Pluralism." *The Monist* 73:411–20.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. 2000. *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, rev. ed. Chicago: ABC International Group.
- . 2003. "Reflections on Islam and Modern Life." *Al-Serat: A Journal of Islamic Studies* 6(1). Available at: <http://www.al-islam.org/al-serat/reflect-nasr.htm>, accessed July 25, 2003.
- Peirce, Charles. 1992. *Reasoning and the Logic of Things*, ed. Ken Ketner and Hilary Putnam. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Reck, Andrew J. 1990. "An Historical Sketch of Pluralism." *The Monist* 73:367–87.
- Rorty, Amelie Oksenberg. 1990. "Varieties of Pluralism in a Polyphonic Society." *Review of Metaphysics* 44:3–20.
- Royce, Josiah. 1951. *The Principles of Logic*. In *Royce's Logical Essays: Collected Logical Essays of Josiah Royce*, ed. Daniel S. Robinson. Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown Company.
- Watson, Walter. 1990. "Types of Pluralism." *The Monist* 73:350–66.

Copyright of Journal of Speculative Philosophy is the property of Pennsylvania State University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.