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James, William

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Introduction

William James was born in New York City on January 11, 1842, and died in Tamworth, New Hampshire, on August 26, 1910 (Myers 1986; for an excellent summary of James's contributions to psychology, see Hilgard 1987). His formal education, interrupted on occasion by periods of physical and mental illness, not to mention an expedition up the Amazon River with Louis Agassiz, and study in Germany, culminated in a medical degree from Harvard in 1869. James never practiced medicine, but began teaching anatomy and physiology at Harvard in 1872; he rose through the ranks, alternating appointments between psychology and philosophy, until his retirement from Harvard in 1907.

Although the honor of establishing the first psychology laboratory is traditionally given to Wundt, in 1879 James was already running such a laboratory at Harvard, complete with instruments for studies in psychophysics and physiological psychology (Harper 1950). His many students who made salient contributions to psychology include Raymond P. Angier, Mary Whiton Calkins, G. Stanley Hall, Ralph Barton Perry, and even Gertrude Stein (Skinner 1934). A founding member of the American Psychological Association, James served as president in 1894 and again in 1904.

On Mental Life

In the first sentence of his *Principles of Psychology* (James 1890/1980), James defined psychology as "the Science of Mental Life" (Vol. I, p. 1, caps original), but he opposed the structuralism of Wundt, with its emphasis on a mental chemistry which built up complex mental states from elementary sensations, images, and feelings. Instead he promoted a functionalism concerned with mental operations and centered around three main principles: mind in body, mind in context, and mind in action. The function of the mind, physically embodied in the brain, was to enable the person to know the world and engage in adaptive behavior. "*The first fact for us, then, as psychologists, is that thinking of some sort goes on*" (James 1890/1980, I, p. 224, italics original), James noted, but he also made clear that "My thinking is first and last and always for the sake of my doing" (II, p. 333). This is consistent with his philosophical stance of pragmatism, with its concern for the practical, real-world consequences of beliefs, values, and norms (James 1907/1975).

As the passages quoted in this essay attest, James – like his novelist brother, Henry – counts as one of the greatest prose stylists in English

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literature. Here he is on the distinction between the physical and the mental (I, pp. 6–8):

> Can we state more distinctly still the manner in which the mental life seems to intervene between impressions made from without upon the body, and reactions of the body upon the outer world again? Let us look at a few facts.
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> If some iron filings be sprinkled on a table and a magnet brought near them, they will fly through the air for a certain distance and stick to its surface. A savage seeing the phenomenon explains it as the result of an attraction or love between the magnet and the filings. But let a card cover the poles of the magnet, and the filings will press forever against its surface without its ever occurring to them to pass around its sides and thus come into more direct contact with the object of their love. Blow bubbles through a tube into the bottom of a pail of water, they will rise to the surface and mingle with the air. Their action may again be poetically interpreted as due to a longing to recombine with the mother-atmosphere above the surface. But if you invert a jar full of water over the pail, they will rise and remain lodged beneath its bottom, shut in from the outer air, although a slight deflection from their course at the outset, or a redescent towards the rim of the jar, when they found their upward course impeded, could easily have set them free.
>
> If now we pass from such actions as these to those of living things, we notice a striking difference. Romeo wants Juliet as the filings want the magnet; and if no obstacles intervene, he moves towards her by as straight a line as they. But Romeo and Juliet, if a wall be built between them, do not remain idiotically pressing their faces against its opposite sides like the magnet and the filings with the card. Romeo soon finds a circuitous way, by scaling the wall or otherwise, of touching Juliet's lips directly. With the filings the path is fixed; whether it reaches the end depends on accidents. With the lover it is the end which is fixed, the path may be modified indefinitely. . ..
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> *The Pursuance of future ends and the choice of means for their attainment, are thus the* mark and *criterion of the presence of mentality* in a phenomenon. We all use this test to discriminate between an intelligent and a mechanical performance. We impute no mentality to sticks and stones, because they never seem to move for *the sake of* anything, but always when pushed, and then indifferently and with no sign of choice. So we unhesitatingly call them senseless.

On the Self

The *Principles* did not have a chapter expressly devoted to personality, or any other topic in social psychology – unless, perhaps, we count the chapter on instincts. But James did have an interest in the subject, as reflected especially in his chapter on "The Consciousness of the Self." James denied that we could have any knowledge of the "transcendental self," the "I" or self-as-subject which is the basis for all conscious experience. Instead, he focused on the "empirical self," the "me" or self-as-object: "*In its widest possible sense*, however, *a man's Self is the sum total of all that he* CAN *call his*, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account" (James 1890/1980, I, 291, italics and caps original). James famously distinguished between three aspects of selfhood, for example: the material self, consisting of one's body and possessions; the spiritual self, or awareness of one's own inner life; and the social self, or the individual's appreciation of how he or she is viewed by others. "Properly speaking, *a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him* and carry an image of him in their mind" (James 1890/1980, I, 294, italics original). This sentence lies at the root of modern notions of the context-specific self-concept – and opens up the possibility of investigating what might be called the "material culture" of the self.

On Freud

James was curious but skeptical about Freudian psychoanalysis (Myers 1990; Simon 1967; Taylor 1999). He reviewed Breuer and Freud's *Studies on Hysteria*, along with Janet's *The Mental State of Hystericals* and Whipple's *Philosophy of Mental Healing*, in the first volume of *Psychological Review* (#2, pp. 195–200) – giving the bulk of attention to Janet. After hearing Freud lecture at Clark University in 1909, James wrote to one friend that

> I hope that Freud and his pupils will push their ideas to their utmost limits, so that we may lean what they are. They can't fail to throw light on human nature; but I confess that he made on me personally the impression of a man obsessed with fixed ideas. I can make nothing in my own case with his dream theories, and obviously 'symbolism' is a most dangerous method (Simon 1967, p. 831).

And to another:

> I strongly suspect Freud, with his dream theory, of being a regular hallucine. But I hope that he and his disciples will push it to its limits, as undoubtedly it covers some facts, and will add to our understanding of "functional" psychology, which is the real psychology (Simon 1967, p. 832).

As critical as they are of Freud, these quotations attest to James's belief that "abnormal" psychology, including dreams and hypnosis as well as psychopathology, could contribute new perspectives on normal mental functioning. To this end, he was involved with the "Boston School" of abnormal psychology and psychotherapy, whose leaders included Morton Prince, first director of the Harvard Psychological Clinic and founding editor (and originally the owner) of the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*; his former student Boris Sidis, later founder of the New York State Psychopathic Institute; and James Jackson Putnam, founding president of the American Psychoanalytical Association.

James adopted the same attitude toward other "exotic" topics in psychology, including demon-possession and witchcraft. He discussed these topics, along with dreams and the hypnogogic state, hypnosis, hysteria and multiple personality, psychosis, genius, and paranormal phenomena such as mediumship and the Ouija board, in his 1896 Lowell Lectures on Exceptional Mental States – reconstructed from James's original notes in an amazing feat of intellectual detective-work by Eugene Taylor (1983; see also Taylor 1996).

On Mind and Body

Although a committed materialist – not for nothing were the first two substantive chapters of the *Principles* devoted to the brain – James considered the independence of mind and body to be an empirical question, and in 1884, he served as co-founder of the American Society for Psychical Research. He even went so far as to keep a deathwatch over his friend, F.W.H. Myers (author of *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, published posthumously in 1913), knowing that Myers would try to communicate with him. And when James himself was dying, he made a similar arrangement with his wife. Henry James may have been having a little fun at his brother's expense when he put so many scenes in *The Bostonians* (1886) concerning parapsychology, spiritualism, and the occult.

James continued in this direction with his treatise on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James 1902/1985). Unlike the Freudians and the evolutionary psychologists who followed him, he attempted to construct a psychology of religion that took religion seriously. He was not so concerned with religious belief as such, though, much less with proving the existence of God, but with the nature of intuition and mysticism as ineffable noetic experiences. Son of a devoted Swedenborgian and godson of the Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, but ever the pragmatist, James was concerned not so much with the validity of mystical experiences but rather their function in the lives of those who experienced them.

Upon meeting Freud at Clark, James reportedly told him that "The future of psychology belongs to your work" (Jones 1955, I, p. 210). James seems to have had in mind Freud's emphasis on unconscious mental life – He spent considerable time in the *Principles* discussing the fugue case of Ansel Bourne, as well as cases of hysteria – though in his discussions of that topic, James was more likely to cite the work of Pierre Janet, Freud's nineteenth-century rival, on hypnosis, hysteria, and multiple personality. James took these reports seriously as evidence for something like unconscious processing, but he had a difficult time grappling with the notion of unconscious thought. And his chapter on "The Mind-Stuff Theory" refutes no fewer than ten purported proofs of the existence of unconscious thoughts. But when he wrote that "[T]he distinction between *the unconscious and the conscious being of the mental state* is the sovereign means

for believing what one likes in psychology, and of turning what might become a science into a tumbling-ground for whimsies" (James 1890/1980, p. 163, emphasis original), he seems only to have insisted that there be empirical proof, not mere suppositions, that there are thoughts which are inaccessible to consciousness. Here he appears to have foreshadowed his later criticism of Freud's emphasis on the interpretation of symbols in dreams and symptoms. Fond of psychologizing (offering plausible interpretations of experience and behavior), he was also cautious about the psychologist's fallacy: "The great snare of the psychologist is the confusion of his own standpoint with that of the mental fact about which he is making his report" – an important caution not just for Freudians, but for anyone who would attribute unconscious beliefs, attitudes, or motives to someone else in the absence of good evidence.

On Subconscious and Co-Conscious

For James, consciousness and thought were identical, so therefore unconscious thought was a contradiction in terms. At the same time, he accepted the evidence from hysteria, fugue, and multiple personality that these patients were unaware of certain percepts, memories, and thoughts which nonetheless remained, as it were, in their minds – accessible to awareness on some occasions if not always, and influencing behavior outside of phenomenal awareness and voluntary control. To resolve this apparent contradiction, James turned to the concept of "subconscious" (Janet 1889) or "co-conscious" (Prince 1908) thought. This is not merely "preconscious", in the modern (or for that matter Freudian) sense, meaning not subject to controlled, attentional processing. Rather, the term refers to a division of consciousness, or double-consciousness, such that two (or perhaps more) streams of consciousness exist side by side, with the personal consciousness unaware of the dissociated or subliminal one (Hilgard 1977; Kihlstrom 1984).

It is often said that James left psychology following publication of the *Principles*. Indeed, he did not like laboratory work (except on hypnosis; see Kihlstrom and McConkey 1990), and he retired from Harvard as a professor of philosophy, not psychology. However, James never abandoned psychology. Surveying the 17 volumes of James's collected works, most of it published after the *Principles*, Taylor (1996) makes it clear that, however much he seems to have diverged into religion (James 1902/1985) or philosophy (James 1907/1975), James continued to be interested in problems of mind. Taylor convincingly demonstrates that a great deal of James's post-*Principles* writing "was directed toward studying 'the rise and fall of the threshold of consciousness' and other phenomena related to abnormal and personality psychology, rather than toward the kind of sterile academic laboratory psychology that was becoming increasingly dominant in the United States at the time" (Taylor 1996, pp. xi–xii). To this end, he focused on divisions of consciousness produced by hypnosis such as posthypnotic amnesia and posthypnotic suggestion; hysteria, multiple personality disorder, and other syndromes of psychopathology; mediumship and other spiritualist and psychic phenomena; hallucinations; mental healing and psychosomatic medicine; meditation, mysticism and religious ecstasy including the alternative psychologies represented by Eastern religions. In this way, Taylor argues, James sought to redefine psychology not as a science of the mind, exactly, but as a science centered on the person, linked to philosophy and the humanities as much as to biology and the natural sciences.

Conclusion

Earlier in his career, James had assembled a collection of "brass instruments" for teaching and experimental work at the Harvard psychological laboratory, but he himself never used them, and in 1892, he arranged for a new colleague, Hugo Munsterberg, a student of Wundt's, to take over the laboratory work so that he could get back to his writing, based on introspection followed by psychologizing as his method. "*Introspective*

Observation is what we have to rely on first and foremost and always. . .", he wrote, ". . . looking into our own minds and reporting what we there discover" (James 1890/1980, I, p. 185, italics and initial caps original). In that important sense, he remained a psychologist to the end, seeking to understand the nature and function of consciousness.

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