


The Principles of Psychology

William James

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Brother of novelist Henry James and godson of eminent philosopher, essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James earned his own reputation for the monumental contributions he made in the field of Psychology. Here is the first volume of James' two part "Principles of Psychology," a textbook which took James twelve years to complete, and which is still prevalent in contemporary psychology texts. James' writings were influenced by Charles Darwin's ideas about adaptive evolutionary change, philosophical pragmatism, and various German psychologists who focused on the study of psychological processes. These two volumes delve into James' assumption that developmental processes involve an interaction of nature and nurture, a view that almost all contemporary developmental psychologists hold. His fundamental theories on brain processes and abstract thought, behavioral tendencies and states of consciousness, all of which he presented a decade before Sigmund Freud, have become integral to the framework of modern

The Principles of Psychology Details

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Nelie says

This is a classic because it is one of the first published books on psychology as a discipline and because it is full of James' ideas about how the mind works solely based on the method of introspection. I read this when I was in graduate school one summer the 100th anniversary of its being published and I am so grateful I was given that opportunity because its amazing the amount of insight in this volume as well as the second one. It takes a while to adjust to the slight differences in his language (the way he uses the word "brain" often does not exactly refer to the material brain for example) but it is a wonderful and worthwhile read. There are certain passages of this work a student of psychology often runs in to but SO much more when read from cover to cover.

Ady Mudrauskas says

I must read it again.; so difficult to retain all the information. His style is hard to follow. Maybe I should give up psychology!

Chrissy says

This was an extremely fascinating, challenging, and at times infuriating read: Fascinating because James accurately predicted so much of modern psychology in 1890, before the experimental method really existed (beyond psychophysics, which he lambasts as a waste of time when one could just introspect instead); Challenging because he roots so many of his insights and explanations in classical philosophy, a slow and thorough approach that breaks the issues down to their fundamental assumptions for examination (I'm not at all used to approaching psychology in this way, and it was extremely rewarding, if laborious); Infuriating because for all he got right, he also got so, so much wrong. James was a religious man, and while he tries to leave spirituality separate from the study of psychology, it regularly seeps back in through his language and assumptions throughout. Case in point: Mind Dust from the Soul.

The book is also home to a wide gamut of hilariously antiquated social faux-pas, from racism to sexism to good old classism. The "old Princeton boys" manner of speech is pure comedy when applied to an elaborate discussion of how boring Germany must be for psychophysics to have come into existence. I got a lot of enjoyment from the book for this rich-white-Victorian comedy appeal alone.

I'm actually really, really glad I read this book. It doesn't offer much in the way of real insight into my own work, but I feel my perspective has broadened significantly through a consideration of my field's humble roots.

Bob Nichols says

In this abbreviated (1893) edition of his classic work, James' model for how we interact with the

environment is simple enough. Input comes from environmental stimuli, the brain processes it and converts it into bodily output (action). "The whole neural organism," he writes, "...is, physiologically considered, but a machine for converting stimuli into reactions; and the intellectual part of our life is knit up with but the middle or 'central' part of the machine's operations."

James has one-half of the interaction right. We do react to stimuli, but his model has us as passive responders to what comes at us from the outside. We are more than what this model suggests. Drawing from Schopenhauer and from Darwin, we are impelled to go out into the world by Will (Schopenhauer) to actively seek (food, shelter, sex, status, love, group membership, etc.) what we need for survival and well being. The fuller model is, sequentially, life energy (Will, biological survival), species-specific life energy, and individual propensities (inborn character) all are involved in directing how we react to what comes at us, how we seek the objects (objectives) we need, and how much energy that is applied to them. Viewed this way, reaction and seeking are active components in the service of survival. Importantly, our interaction with the environment starts from within.

James' model may reflect a residual inheritance of the Western philosophical tradition coming from Plato and others that believes the mind rides supreme. James may also advance as well as reflect a behaviorist model where human nature slides into the background, which leaves human reason free to create ideals for humans and society.

When James refers to will, he means rational control, not the core, inner impulse that is Schopenhauer's Will that pushes reason. When James refers to motivation, he is referencing the "exciting" capacity of external stimuli, not the impulses prompted by internal need. The sharpness of James' theory fades when the next question is asked. Yes, external stimuli excite, but what is it inside of us that causes us to care enough to (1) be excited, and (2) to react one way and not another? James notes that the body (mysteriously?) has "a mind of its own" and this suggests that we have more of an active core than what James allows. Elsewhere, he states that we love adulation, we desire to please, and we are ambitions and vain. These well-known human traits are not reactive, but inner needs that motivate us to go out into the world and seek interaction with external objects in particular ways.

James' theory does not allow for an inner "given" human being because, it might be speculated, this does not provide sufficient flexibility for us to become what James would hope we might become. Again, he says, objects and thoughts of objects motivate our reaction, and pleasure and pain reinforce or inhibit how we react. This view is at odds with Schopenhauer and Darwin's view that not only do we have a common life impulse (Will, survival), we also have a relatively fixed character that defines (or provides a propensity for) what objects we seek and defend against and the level of energy that we apply to them. Our inner character defines a substantial collection of inner needs. These needs Schopenhauer says are "pain". They are something we want to be satisfied. Pain prompts our action in the world, both seeking and reacting, to satisfy need. When we are successful in seeking or reacting, we experience pleasure and then actions stop until the life force within pops up again (e.g., hunger, sex, need to affirm group membership and one's value within the group). James disagrees. He rejects Schopenhauer's "determinism" of "fixed character" and goes on to say that "The problem with the man is less what act he shall now resolve to do than what being he shall now choose to become." As what that "man" might be, it is not for the weak-minded and sentimental type. Rather, it is the "heroic man" who by "pure inward willingness....makes himself one of the masters and the lords of life."

James' view regarding the role of mind to guide behavior is not inaccurate. That is the evolutionary role for mind. However, the ends that the mind serves are relatively fixed (generally, survival ends and well-being, and by variable character traits that help define how each of us more specifically interact with the

environment), and mind's role is to make choices about how these fixed biological needs will be met. Even with his admirable attempt to unite psychology with Darwinian biology, James nevertheless minimizes the role for relatively fixed biological ends, and he believes that we more or less have a blank slate to create ourselves. The alternative perspective outlined here suggests we are more anchored, for good and bad, than what James would allow. This is, perhaps, a more realistic assessment of who we are and who we are able to become.

Nightlite says

This extraordinary book published in 1890 describes psychology in terms that would be just as applicable today as they were in his day. William James did an amazing job of presenting this complex subject in logical step-by-step terms that support his opinions both biologically and psychologically. Highly recommended for those interested in the subject.

Rosemary Ferlinger says

Amazing insights and extraordinary neurological detail along with extremely cogent reasoning gives this book a modern aura if it weren't for the antiquated language. A startling look into a brilliant 19th century mind.

Jamey says

Written in 1890, it's a classic tastecake! In chapter 10, "The Stream of Thought," James lays the groundwork for Joyce and Woolf and all that good stuff.

Brendan says

Awesome.

Br0k3nglass says

The Principles of Psychology by William James (1890)

JP says

It's the first modern form of truly scientific psychological analysis. He also builds from a knowledge of

philosophy and later in his life focused very much on that.

Earnest says

I started reading this book because he gets referenced alot... there seems to be a pretty avid following of his also... but I have yet to find that ingenuity.... the reading is pretty tough so I'm probably missing alot of stuff

Sean Murray says

A hard slog.

Read it if you must. It's a sensible "deep background" book for most of psychology. Naturally, it's pretty badly outdated in places. An important historical document
