50 Psychology CLASSICS

WHO WE ARE, HOW WE THINK, WHAT WE DO -

Insight and Inspiration from 50 key books

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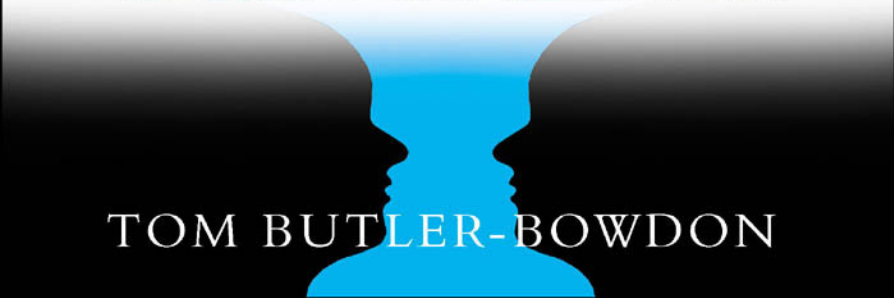

TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

1890

The Principles of Psychology

"Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as 'chain' or 'train' do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life.*"*

"The only thing which psychology has a right to postulate at the outset is the fact of thinking itself."

"The most peculiar social self which one is apt to have is in the mind of the person one is in love with. The good or bad fortunes of this self cause the most intense elation and dejection… To his own consciousness he is not, so long as this particular social self fails to get recognition, and when it is recognized his contentment passes all bounds."

In a nutshell

Psychology is the science of mental life, which means the science of the self.

CHAPTER 29

William James

William James is widely regarded as America's greatest philosopher. He is also (with William Wundt) considered to be a father of modern psychology.

Psychology was once an area of study within philosophy, and James was for a number of years a philosophy professor. The distinction he made between the two fields was this: Psychology was the "science of mental life"; that is, of minds within a particular body, which exist in time and space, having thoughts and feelings in relation to the physical world they are in. On the other hand, explanations of thoughts as the product of some deeper force, such as the soul or ego, were really the realm of metaphysics or philosophy.

James considered this new subject a *natural* science that required analysis of feelings, desires, cognitions, reasoning, and decisions according to their own features and dynamics, in the same way that one would explain building a house by looking at its stones and bricks. His choice to look at the phenomena of psychology, rather than some theory behind them, advanced the subject considerably and achieved his aim of putting it on a firmer scientific footing.

James was often depressed or in frail physical health, and *The Principles of Psychology* took him all of 12 years to write. In his Preface he commented, "it has grown to a length which no one can regret more than the writer himself. The man must indeed be sanguine who, in this crowded age, can hope to have many readers for fourteen hundred continuous pages from his pen." This was the famous two-volume "long course," the full version of the book. But James also produced a condensed form, known as the "Jimmy" to college students, who are grateful not to have to tackle the real thing.

Given its size, it would be presumptuous to "sum up" James's masterpiece. However, we look at a few ideas that hopefully give a flavor of its contents.

Creatures of habit

"When we look at creatures from an outward point of view," James noted, "one of the first things that strike us is that they are bundles of habits."

What are habits exactly? In his research into the physiology of the brain and nervous system, James concluded that they boil down to being "discharges in the nerve centers" involving a pattern of reflex paths that are successively

woken up. Once one of these paths is created, it becomes easier for the nerve current to pass along the same path again.

However, James noted a difference between the habitual behavior of animals and that of humans: While the actions of most animals are automatic, and relatively limited and simple, because of our wide variety of desires and wants, humans have to consciously form new habits if we are to achieve certain results. The problem is that creating new, good habits requires work and application. James wrote that the key to good habits is to act decisively on the resolutions you make. Actions create the motor effects in our nervous system that turn a wish into a habit; the brain has to "grow" to our wishes, and the path will not be made unless this repeated action takes place.

The key, James commented, was to make the nervous system our ally instead of our enemy: "As we become permanent drunkards by so many separate drinks, so we become saints in the moral, and authorities and experts in the practical and scientific spheres, by so many separate acts and hours of work." Though we don't think they matter that much at the time, our actions taken together account either for a powerful integrity or a damning failure.

This all seems very familiar to us now, but much of the emphasis on forging positive habitual behavior in today's psychology and personal development writing can be traced back to James's thinking on the subject.

Us and the rest

James's understanding of psychology revolved around the personal self. That is, general talk about "thought" and "feeling" as abstract concepts did not mean much next to the personal reality of "I think" and "I feel." He wrote that each person is separated from every other by a wall—that is, the skull enclosing the brain—and ventured that the world is neatly divided into two halves, with ourselves taking up one whole half, and the rest of the world, with everyone in it, the other:

> *One great splitting of the whole universe into two halves is made by each of us; and for each of us almost all of the interest attaches to one of the halves… When I say that we all call the two halves by the same names, and that those names are "me" and "not-me" respectively, it will at once be seen what I mean.*

This is a simple insight that, like so many of James's comments, borders on folk wisdom. However, it recognizes that people become interested in psychology not because they want to study broad principles regarding thought and emotion, but because they want to know why *they* think and feel the way they do.

A division of the world into "me" and "the rest" is a little confronting, especially for those who consider that they live for others, yet it is the very

physiology of human beings, with one brain inside one body, always looking out at the rest of the world, that makes it a fact.

The stream of thought

Not only do we all see the world differently, but our own personal consciousness will not be the same from day to day, or even hour to hour. As James put this:

We feel things differently according as we are sleepy or awake, hungry or full, fresh or tired; differently at night and in the morning, differently in summer and in winter, and above all things differently in childhood, manhood, and old age… The difference of the sensibility is shown best by the difference of our emotion about the things from one age to another… What was bright and exciting becomes weary, flat, and unprofitable. The bird's song is tedious, the breeze is mournful, the sky is sad.

He observed that we can never have exactly the same thought more than once. We may be able to sustain an illusion of sameness, but the fact of a constantly changing world, and the need for our continually altering reactions to it, mean this is impossible:

Often we are ourselves struck at the strange differences in our successive views of the same thing. We wonder how we ever could have opined as we did last month about a certain matter. We have outgrown the possibility of that state of mind, we know not how. From one year to another we see things in new lights. And it is just as well, for this constant change, this perpetual movement and then return to equilibrium, is what makes us human.

James also famously observed that thought is continuous, like a stream. We use phrases like a "train of thought" or a "chain of thought," but the real nature of thought is flowing. He noted, "The transition between the thought of one object and the thought of another is no more a break in the thought than a joint in a bamboo is a break in the wood. It is a part of the consciousness as much as the joint is a part of the bamboo."

Since James, the science of psychology has parsed every thought, feeling, and emotion into thousands of categories, which indeed is the work of a science. But psychology would do well to remember that this is not how it *feels* to be conscious. Consciousness is not at all like the processing of a computer. Rather, to be alive is to experience a constantly flowing river of ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

The successful self

James admitted that he had sometimes fancied being a millionaire, an explorer, or a lady killer, but came back to the sad truth that he had to settle on one self. To be many things would be too contradictory. To be effective in life, we have to choose from many possible personages, and "stake our salvation" on that self. The downside is that if you stake your self on being, for instance, a great oarsman or a great psychologist, to fail at this ambition is a grievous hit to our self-esteem.

If there is little gap between our potentialities and our actualities, we regard ourselves well. James famously provided a formula for self-esteem:

$$\textit{Self-esteem} = \frac{\textit{Success}}{\textit{Pretensions}}$$

He pointed to a "lightness of the heart" when we give up chasing certain potentialities or illusions that we will never achieve, such as being young, slim, musical, or a famous athlete. Each illusion, if discarded, is one less thing that will disappoint us, and one less thing that will hold us back from real success.

Final comments

James's focus on the self does not seem remarkable now, as we live in such an individualistic age. But at the time he was writing, the social fabric was much thicker and one's place in society was arguably of much greater import than what went on inside one's head. Yet when we consider the restrictions he placed on his own subject, James's thinking could not really have gone any other way. His definition of psychology as the science of mental life meant the life within individual brains, the thoughts and feelings of individual people—not the "human mind" in general.

While the twentieth-century psychologists who came after him got caught up in rather mechanical models of the mind and behavior, James described human consciousness as like the aurora borealis, the luminous northern lights, whose "whole internal equilibrium shifts with every pulse of change." Such a poetic gift for explanation did not endear James to the lab-rat-in-mazes brand of modern psychology, but it was precisely his artistic sensitivity, deep philosophical knowledge, and even openness to mystical ideas that allowed him to push out the boundaries of his field. Others would follow to do the laborious job of turning psychology into a science, but it needed a philosopher of his caliber to first paint a picture of the landscape.

Much has been made of James's elegant and lively prose, and it is this—plus a personal, familiar tone unusual for the times—that makes *The Principles of Psychology* readable today. James was often overshadowed by his novelist brother, but William James could easily have been a writer himself

rather than a psychologist—it has been said that Henry James was the psychologist who wrote novels, and William the novelist who wrote psychology!

That said, *The Principles of Psychology* is no easy read, with the good parts lying amid many long passages that either are quite technical (involving the physiology of the brain and nervous system) or mull over difficult concepts. James himself suggested that readers skip around and read what interested them, rather than going through the whole work—from someone who helped establish a science, a typically humble suggestion.

William James

Born in New York City in 1842, the oldest son of Henry and Mary James, William James enjoyed a comfortable and cosmopolitan upbringing in a family of five children. His well-off father was deeply interested in theology and mysticism, particularly the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. In 1855 the family moved to Europe, where James attended schools in France, Germany, and Switzerland; he learnt several languages and visited many of Europe's museums.

Returning to the United States in 1860, James spent a year and a half trying to become a painter under William Morris Hunt, but decided to enrol at Harvard University. He began studying chemistry but later changed to medicine. In 1865 he was offered the chance to go on a scientific expedition with the well-known naturalist Louis Agassiz, but suffered an array of health problems plus, away from his family for the first time, terrible homesickness and depression. In 1867 he went to Germany and studied physiology under Hermann von Helmholtz, and was exposed to thinkers and ideas in the new field of psychology. Two years later James returned to Harvard, where at 27 he finally received his medical degree.

Over the next three years he experienced an emotional breakdown, and was unable to study or work properly. In 1872, at the age of 30, he began his first job teaching physiology at Harvard. In 1875 he started giving courses in psychology, and also established the first experimental psychology laboratory in America. In the year he began work on The Principles of Psychology, *1878, he also married Alice Howe Gibbons, a Boston school teacher. They had five children.*

On their visits to America, James met both Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Among his famous students were educationalist John Dewey and psychologist Edward Thorndike. Landmark writings include The Will to Believe *(1897),* The Varieties of Religious Experience *(1902), and* Pragmatism *(1907).*

James died in 1910 at his summer home in New Hampshire.