

William James - Outline

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William James – Outline

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William James (1842-1910)

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William's famous brother Henry
circa 1863

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1. Biographical information

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Born 1842, eldest child of a wealthy family
Grandfather William: Irish immigrant who made a fortune, owned the Erie Canal, railroads – once bought Syracuse, New York for \$30,000. Married 3 times, had 16 children.
Father Henry not a businessman – engaged in philosophy and writing; suffered severe depression in his thirties – talked himself out of it.

1. Biographical information

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- * The James children (incl. Alice, Rob, and Wilkie) traveled in Europe for much of their childhood, toured museums, and had tutors.
- * Occasionally went to school in whatever town they were living in.
- * But family debate was their main arena for learning
- * Multi-lingual.

1. Biographical information

Brother Henry the famous novelist - known for psychological complexity of his characters. Lived in Europe most of his life.

Henry & William - very different personalities.

- * Henry – reserved, contemplative, refined; for him, to think was an end in itself.
- * William – outspoken, immersed in the world; for him, to think was to act.

1. Biographical information

William first studied painting, then chemistry and geology, then medicine at Harvard. Graduated in 1869, but never practised.

Married *Alice* – marriage arranged by his father, because William was too shy to speak to women much.

- * They had five children – and by all reports a successful, loving relationship – but he left the country each time Alice gave birth!

2. Career

1865: joined expedition to Brazil. Returned to U.S. because of severe sea-sickness.

1865: to Europe where he visited Helmholtz's lab, met Wundt.

1873 – 1874: taught anatomy & physiology, at Harvard

1875 – began teaching Physiological Psychology, at Harvard

1879 – *first lectures* in Philosophy, at Harvard

2. Career

1884: helped found American Society for Psychical Research (evidence of his radical empiricism)

1885: Appointed Professor of Philosophy at Harvard

1890: Published *Principles of Psychology* to great acclaim

1890: Established the psychological laboratory at Dane Hall, Harvard, one of the first such labs in America

3. Important works

1890 – *Principles of Psychology*

- * Made James's reputation
- * First important work on Psychology in North America
- * Enormously important in development of a separate discipline of psychology
- * *"the empirical correlation of the various sorts of thought or feeling with definite conditions of the brain"*

3. Important works

1902 – *Varieties of Religious Experience*

- * Gifford Lectures at University of Edinburgh
- * Shocked scientific establishment
- * Argued against Clifford's view that "It is wrong always, and everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."
- * James: the attempt to avoid error can be as misleading as the pursuit of truth

3. Important works

1902 – *Varieties of Religious Experience*

- * Clifford: Do not hold beliefs because they are comforting. The manly thing to do is to face the universe as it is. Keep to the rule.
- * James: (a) Emotion is not an obstacle to finding truth. (b) Everyone uses emotion in reasoning – either *fear* of error or *hope* of discovering important truths through faith.

3. Important works

1902 – *Varieties of Religious Experience*

- * Most scientific questions can be decided on the basis of evidence (facts) and logic
- * When a scientific question can *not* be decided thus, then we must use emotion. Quintessential example: does God exist?
- * If you decide that God does exist, and that decision makes you happy, then the decision was rational.

3. Important Works

1907 – *Pragmatism* – see below

1912 – *Radical Empiricism*

- * Basic idea: approach all questions with a truly open mind.
- * Do not be dogmatic. Don't prejudge the outcome of your investigations.

4. Important influences on his thinking

i. Family

- * Deeply religious family
- * Father a well-known philosopher of religion, writer, and Swedenborgian.
- * Early on, father's religious ideas in danger of "suffocating" William
- * William escaped to science – but found more suffocation there among dogmatic materialists.

4. Important influences on his thinking

ii. His own depression

- * James took a long time to find a purpose in life
- * To please his father, he tried a number of careers, such as being a painter, but without success
- * Meanwhile brother Henry was a major success as a novelist while quite young
- * In his twenties, William went through a major depression, that he exited through an act of will

4. Important influences on his thinking

ii. His own depression

- 1870 – William resolved his severe, almost suicidal depression by deciding that he was free to believe what he wanted to, and that his first act of free will would be to believe in free will.
- * From this experience, he learned that philosophy, if taken seriously, can change, even save, your life – the source of his pragmatism.
 - * We can will free will into existence!

4. Important influences on his thinking

iii. The Pragmatists – Especially C.S. Pierce

- * argued against many old tensions in philosophy (e.g., long-standing, unresolved questions)
- * emphasis on action and outcomes of action
- * “Let action be the test of truth.”
- * Knowledge is created by humans; there are no deeper truths; religious truth is as valid as scientific truth – both can help you live
- * Against dogmatism & elaborate theories.



Charles Sanders Pierce

“The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite and assignable reasons.”

5. Pragmatism

Human thought is understood as practical problem-solving, which proceeds by testing rival hypotheses against experience, as a basis for action.

Pragmatism has value only if it is applied

- * Dewey – philosophy of education
- * James – psychology: importance of habit, emotion, pragmatic theory of truth

5. Pragmatism

Psychology does not give us the ultimate truth about human behavior.

- * When it's *pragmatic* (i.e., helpful) to use psychology, then we should do so.
- * But art, literature, and theatre are other valid sources of knowledge about the human experience.
- * This reflects James' basic modesty and humanity.

5. Pragmatism – Habit

- * Much of our behavior is governed by habit
- * But we can choose our habits, when we are young, and we should do so: we are free to become who and what we want to be, through an exercise of *will*
- * Note: if you own a dog, you are always training it. Here, the idea is that if you own a self, you are always training it – either for good or for ill.

5. Pragmatism – Emotion

James is famous for his theory of how we have emotions – now called James-Lange theory

“Common sense says, we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike. The hypothesis here to be defended says that this order of sequence is incorrect, that the one mental state is not immediately induced by the other, that the bodily manifestations must first be interposed between, and that the more rational statement is that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble...”

5. Pragmatism – Emotion

“Without the bodily states following on the perception, the latter would be purely cognitive in form, pale, colorless, destitute of emotional warmth. We might then see the bear, and judge it best to run, receive the insult and deem it right to strike, but we could not actually feel afraid or angry.”

5. Pragmatism – Emotion

This view of emotions leads, of course, to some practical advice:

“Whistling to keep up courage is no mere figure of speech. On the other hand, sit all day in a moping posture, sigh, and reply to everything with a dismal voice, and your melancholy lingers... if we wish to conquer undesirable emotional tendencies in ourselves, we must assiduously, and in the first instance cold-bloodedly, go through the outward motions of those contrary dispositions we prefer to cultivate.”

5. Pragmatism – Emotion

- * James argued against the doctrine that we can or should always leave emotion out of our decisions, in science or in daily life
- * Argued that scientists in fact do respond emotionally: e.g., they *fear* being wrong and the whole point of the scientific method is to protect us against that fate because we fear it.
- * Modern echo: Zajonc – *there can be no learning without emotion*

5. Pragmatism – Emotion

- * Emotion is a necessary part of decisions in daily life because the issue is always, “did this action make your life better?”
- * Modern echo of this view: Damasio – certain kinds of brain damage impair patient’s emotional processing – such patients make very bad decisions in their personal lives.

5. Pragmatism – Truth

A pragmatic theory of truth – truth *happens*

- * truth happens because *we go looking for it*
- * truth is a feature of beliefs that help us cope with the events of our lives.
- * Beliefs that best help us cope are the ones we call *true*.
- * note rejection of idea of ‘authority.’

6. Memory

Most famous contribution here is the distinction between primary and secondary memory

Primary memory – what we could call STM; retrieval is effortless; linked to consciousness
Secondary memory – what we could call LTM; permanent; retrieval is effortful

Total recall vs. partial recall

- * memory decay & reinforcement create structure in web of associations; save us from total recall.

6. Memory

Recall influenced by:

- * frequency of association (“habit”)
- * recency of association
- * vividness
- * affective tone

* Note the extent to which these things involve *experience*.

6. Memory

James suggested that recall is a form of problem-solving

- * in search of a memory, we activate many thoughts, then sift among them, keeping those that are relevant and discarding the others.
- * This process is interactively iterative, leading to retrieval.
- * Reminiscent of Simon & Newell’s *General Problem Solver* model of 1960s

6. Memory

James also developed a very modern view of brain activity during memory (learning associations), reflecting his training in neurophysiology:

“When two elementary brain processes have been active together or in immediate succession, one of them, on reoccurring, tends to propagate its excitement into the other.”

- * precursor to Hebbian learning theory

Memory

“The amount of activity at any given point in the brain-cortex is the sum of the tendencies of all other points to discharge into it, such tendencies being proportionate (1) to the number of times the excitement of each other point may have accompanied that of the point in question; (2) to the intensity of such excitations; and (3) to the absence of any rival point functionally disconnected with the first point, into which the discharges might be diverted.”

- * modern idea of statistical, summed activations

7. Attention

James emphasized the selection function of attention:

“Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others and is a condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed scatterbrain state ...” (James, 1890)

7. Attention

taking possession by the mind,

- * we exert control over attention

one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought.

- * we can’t attend to lots of things at once—attending has a cost

7. Attention

withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others

* *ignoring is an active process*

has a real opposite in the confused, dazed scatterbrain state

* *attention delivers our 'seamless' perception of the world*

8. Consciousness

Consciousness is personal

* No elements that are common among minds

Consciousness is continuous and cannot be divided up for analysis

* It is *sensibly* continuous – that is, we experience it as a stream

Consciousness is constantly changing

8. Consciousness

For James, consciousness is not an entity, it is a *function*, an operation rather than a thing:

* the function is to adapt quickly to new environments

Consciousness involves awareness of the world but also of the self – consciousness is personal:

* the self is the constant thing within us that makes us human

* constant self in stream of consciousness

8. Consciousness

The stream of consciousness:

*The structuralists emphasized the division of consciousness into 'atoms' and then focused on them.

* Titchner: Consciousness is the sum of the elements.

* James emphasized the flow of consciousness, its dynamics.

Consciousness is private, personal, and uniquely one's own.

"In this room--this lecture room, say--there are a multitude of thoughts, yours and mine, some of which cohere mutually, and some not. . . . My thought belongs with *my* other thoughts, and your thought with *your* other thoughts. Whether anywhere in this room there be a *mere* thought, which is nobody's thought, we have no means of ascertaining, for we have no experience of its like. The only states of consciousness that we naturally deal with are found in particular consciousnesses, minds, selves, concrete particular I's and you's."

(The Stream of Consciousness, 1892)