

William James (1842–1910)

Robinson (1992) maintains that James was presenting nothing new or novel. In fact, Robinson holds that James' psychology and philosophy lacked originality. Such unoriginality was not a sign of weakness of mind but a determination to take nature as it was presented. James, as Allport also suggested, was not easy to summarize and present because, Robinson concluded,

his entire system of thought is opposed to every species of reduction, simplification, and finality. The task of conveying his position on the mind–body problem is especially daunting because he dealt with it in quite different contexts and, therefore, in quite different ways. (Robinson, 1992, p. 314)

He appears to be tolerant of all of the various solutions at different places. James' method, to Robinson, rather than suffering confusion is one that recommends itself because of its close examination of all of the extant positions. It particularly recommends itself in an age of psychology that places a premium on what is new (and buries the old, sometimes alive, I might add). James' position deserves to be considered if only for its exposition and analysis of the various positions.

James entered the scene, historically, when psychological thought was vacillating between various reductionist propositions and arguments in favor of transcendentalism (Robinson, 1992). Partisans formed into camps and the lines of communication were severed; discussion or debate was in-house. As James saw the matter, extreme positions were not tenable and were shown to be in error in the experience of everyday life. Radical materialism may explain much but it simply does not address what matters—our interests, hopes, and ideals. Whether the history of planetary life was due to material forces or non-material forces, the facts are what they are, no matter how they are interpreted. Consciousness, in particular and most assuredly, exists and must be included in a full accounting of the facts.

James' Pragmatism

William James (1842–1910) took pragmatism to be an answer to those individuals, the skeptics, who denied the existence of the world of common sense (Putnam, 1998). As a theory of what is true, the pragmatist holds that a belief can be considered true if it is in agreement with reality. One, therefore, may consider a belief to be correct if verified. Verification may be direct, e.g., one can directly verify the belief that it is raining by becoming wet. Acting on a belief, on the other hand, and discovering that the consequences that follow do not contradict what was expected, can verify beliefs. Contrary to what is commonly supposed, and which forms an unjustified basis for criticizing him, James was not proposing that truth is defined by what is useful. A better way to state James' meaning may be state that the truth of a proposition hangs upon how well the idea satisfies the conditions that it was expected to be useful in. As James (1907/1955) was to note, the term pragmatism is derived from the Greek word that means "action," and it evolved into "practice" and "practical." Truth is bound to action in the world because it involves conformity with conditions as determined through practice. Pragmatists like James oppose traditional philosophical views that hold that an idea's truth is a property that is independent of the experience of humans (Urmson and Rée, 1989). Claims about independent, absolute truths were meaningless, at least as far as could be determined from personal experience.

The pragmatists, rather than slipping into skepticism about the objective world of experience, chose instead to be practical, which is, of course, what the term pragmatic means. Their practicality was in suspending doubt, rather than praising it, until such time as conditions warranted adjustments to beliefs held. In other words, given their realism, this world has to be lived in and we need knowledge of it. Perhaps that knowledge will be imperfect and lacking in absolute certainty but it will be useful until such time as some experience challenges it. At that time the belief will be modified to better accommodate those new conditions.

If practical consequences reported inconsistencies, James was prepared to refrain from rendering judgment, preferring to be open to possibilities. There was no single concept about the universe that could be considered to be a complete and final answer (Urmson and Rée, 1989). The world evolves, the universe is changing, and, as it does, our knowledge grows and changes too; nothing is ever settled finally. Science, after all, had provided perfectly good working assumptions, or what could even be called laws, but it had also been shown to have its fallibilities.

James has been considered an individual of paradoxes (Allport, 1943). At first James would make one claim and support one theory and then he would about face and develop an opposing point of view. This, in the estimation of Allport, was a strength of James rather than a weakness and reflected his refusal to commit himself to something until he felt certain. James may not have realized his contradictions but to Allport his contradictions were a reflection not of his confusion but of his honesty. Consistency was not a luxury that would be beneficial. He had to report what his understanding of some topic was and in that regard integrity was more important than consistency. His epistemology—pragmatism—admitted of contradictory notions until such time as one or the other, or both, were judged not to fit how things are, or are not, and if the necessary evidence was unavailable judgment had to be held in abeyance. So it was for James, according to Allport, with the mind–body problem.

To Allport (1943), James' (1890/1950) chapter on automaton theory advances different solutions to the mind–body problem that were in opposition—parallelism, interactionism, and epiphenomenalism. He began by defending a radical reflexology and then he challenged it as unwarranted, simple, and one-sided. He wondered what part consciousness played if all is reflex. Consciousness surely had a part to play, so he explored the idea that mind affects body, entering the fray as a causal agent—interactionism. At other times he accepts the idea of physiological determinism. Then he ends the chapter by claiming that parallelism may be the best course but that it should be recognized as merely a halting place until the issue was more fully worked out. One could, on this account, say that James defends dualism in his approach to the problem.

Functional Psychology

Functional psychologists, as would Gibson later, were concerned with investigating the relationship, or function, of psychological processes with the physical world (Lombardo, 1987). It was the recognition of the importance of evolution to the development of psychological processes that led the functionalist psychologists to argue that mental processes should be considered functions of a living organism that supported continued existence (Heidbreder, 1933). This marked a radical shift for psychology. Psychologists, at the latter part of the nineteenth century, had been focusing on states of consciousness and on what the

structural makeup of these mental states was (e.g., Wundt's analysis of the mind through introspection and Titchener's structural psychology). This set a limit to psychological investigation and rendered consciousness independent of the processes of living (at least in its investigation).

The focus in psychology had long been upon the rational aspect of the mind but, with the functionalists, a shift was taking place toward the practical side of mind, i.e., what its purpose was, its function (James, 1905). It was apparent from James' writing that he recognized the importance of evolutionary theory for psychology:

The theory of evolution is mainly responsible for this. Man, we now have reason to believe, has been evolved from infra-human ancestors, in whom pure reason hardly existed, if at all, and whose mind, so far as it can have had any function, would appear to have an organ for adapting their movements to the impressions received from the environment, so as to escape the better from destruction. Consciousness would thus seem in the first instance to be nothing but a sort of superadded biological perfection, useless unless it prompted to useful conduct, and inexplicable apart from that consideration. (James, 1905, pp. 23–24)

James clearly was of the view that consciousness was something that came into existence and that its first appearance was due to its being serviceable to continued existence, i.e., to dealing with the problems that confront a living being in its struggle to maintain its existence.

Stream of Consciousness

The stream of consciousness is James' metaphor for how the mind is experienced in its working. Consciousness is not composed of discrete bits that are joined together, it is a continuous flow; it is sensibly changing and continuous (James, 1890/1950). It has certain characteristics: 1) Consciousness is personal, it reflects the individual person. It is foolish to search for common elements, i.e., the generalized mind. 2) Consciousness is continuous; it cannot be divided up for purposes of analysis. Neither simple sensations nor simple ideas are found in unanalyzed, un-intellectualized experience. The stream-like quality of consciousness makes it foolish to analyze it introspectively in terms of static elements (as elementarists like Titchener were trying to do). 3) It is constantly changing; one can never have exactly the same thought twice; one is not the same person the second time. Each recurring idea occurs within a changed context of accumulated experience. The stream of consciousness provides the context for the idea and it is always changing. 4) It deals with objects other than itself. Much of what makes up the content of thought involves environmental occurrences. 5) Consciousness is selective. Many events enter consciousness and only some are selected for further attention, some are rejected, and some are accentuated. (See www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo for a demonstration.) 6) Consciousness is functional; its purpose is to aid the individual in the negotiations with the world.

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