The Scope of Psychology

William James (1890)

The American psychologist William James’s *Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890, was a major milestone in the history of psychology. In it, James asserts that psychology should focus on the functions of consciousness, an idea that helped establish the school of functionalism and that continues to be important to the study of psychology today.

James (1842–1910) obtained his M. D. from Harvard University in 1869 and accepted a teaching position in psychology there three years later. He was a popular professor at Harvard, and wrote on a variety of topics, including consciousness, emotion, personality, learning, and religion. His impact in psychology is still evident today, as students continue to learn about the topics he wrote about back at the turn of last century.

This selection is taken from James’s most famous work, the two-volume *Principles of Psychology*. In it, James argues that psychology is the “science of mental life.” Although he includes feelings and cognitions in his definition of psychology, he emphasizes the role of the brain in behaviors that serve the function of survival. His book formed the cornerstone of many early psychology courses, and it encouraged psychologists to take a broad view of their discipline. This book is still very much read and studied today. As you read this selection, note the changes that have occurred since James wrote about psychology.

**Key Concept:** an early definition of psychology

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Psychology is the Science of Mental Life, both of its phenomena and their conditions. The phenomena are such things as we call feelings, desires, cognitions, reasonings, decisions, and the like; and, superficially considered, their variety and complexity is such as to leave a chaotic impression on the observer. ...[Reflection shows that phenomena [experience in the outer world] have absolutely no power to influence our ideas until they have first impressed our senses and our brain. The bare existence of a past fact is no ground for our remembering it. Unless we have seen it, or somehow underwent it, we shall never know of its having been. The experiences of the body are thus one of the conditions of the faculty of memory being what it is. And a very small amount of reflection on facts shows that one part of the body, namely, the brain, is the part whose experiences are directly concerned. If the nervous communication be cut off between the brain and other parts, the experiences of those other parts are non-existent for the mind. The eye is blind, the ear deaf, the hand insensible and motionless. And conversely, if the brain be injured, consciousness is abolished or altered, even although every other organ in the body be ready to play its normal part. A blow on the head, a sudden subtraction of blood, the pressure of an apoplectic hemorrhage, may have the first effect; whilst a very few ounces of alcohol or grains of opium or hasheesh, or a whiff of chloroform or nitrous oxide gas, are sure to have the second. The delirium of fever, the altered self of insanity, are all due to foreign matters circulating through the brain, or to pathological changes in that organ’s substance. The fact that the brain is the one immediate bodily condition of the mental operations is indeed so universally admitted nowadays that I need spend no more time in illustrating it, but will simply postulate it and pass on. ... Bodily experiences, therefore, and more particularly brain-experiences, must take a place amongst those conditions of the mental life of which Psychology need take account. ... Our first conclusion, then, is that a certain amount of brain-physiology must be presupposed or included in Psychology.

In still another way the psychologist is forced to be something of a nerephysiologist. Mental phenomena are not only conditioned ... by bodily processes; but they lead to them. ... That they lead to acts is of course the most