

William James: The Principles of Psychology

Chapter 1: The Scope of Psychology

Question: What is psychology?

Answer: "Psychology is the Science of Mental Life, both of its **phenomena** and their **conditions**" (p. 1)

- "The **phenomena** are such things as we call feeling, desires, cognitions, reasonings, decisions, and the like" (p. 1)
 - "superficially considered, their variety and complexity is such as to leave a chaotic impression on the observer" (p. 1).
 - Our desire to **unify** the phenomena tempts us to follow one of two paths:
 - **Path #1 ("soul-theory"): Classification** of faculties and subsequent **affiliation** (of identified faculties) via some sort of essence (or "**common agent**") that has always lurked behind them (or somehow grounds them)
 - If we follow this path, we might begin by distinguishing among various faculties; e.g.,
 - Memory
 - Reasoning
 - Volition
 - Imagination
 - Appetite
 - We can then postulate a "simple entity" that somehow unifies these faculties: "the personal Soul" (p. 1)
 - Ontologically, **coherence precedes chaos** (as the soul precedes its varied manifestations)
 - **Path #2 (associationism):** Coherence is found within the chaos (rather than in a more primitive state of affairs).
 - We encounter a constellation of discrete "ideas" (that may be "faint" or "vivid").
 - These ideas are related to each other in various ways (cohesions, repulsions, successions, etc.)
 - "The very Self or ego of the individual comes in this way to be viewed no longer as the pre-existing source of the representations, but rather as their last and most complete fruit" (p. 2).
 - S.Q., If our kaleidoscopic experience makes any sense at all, it is because we have found (or rather, we *are*) the pattern that renders this chaos meaningful. This path

appears to have much in common with a social constructionist approach to understanding the self.

- James dismisses a simple psychology of faculties (**Path #1**) on the grounds that it has limited explanatory power:
 - "Any particular cognition, for example, or recollection, is accounted for on the soul-theory by being referred to the spiritual faculties of Cognition or of Memory. These faculties themselves are thought of as absolute properties of the soul; that is, to take the case of memory, no reason is given why we should remember a fact as it happened, except that so to remember it constitutes the essence of our Recollective Power." (p. 2).
 - "For why should this absolute god-given Faculty retain so much better the events of yesterday than those of last year, and, best of all, those of an hour ago? Why, again, in old age should its grasp of childhood's events seem firmest? Why should illness and exhaustion enfeeble it? Why should repeating an experience strengthen our recollection of it? Why should drugs, fevers, asphyxia, and excitement resuscitate things long since forgotten?" (p. 3).
- We may indeed study faculties, but our scientific challenge is to somehow explain their operation:
 - "Evidently...**the faculty does not exist absolutely, but works under conditions; and the quest of the conditions becomes the psychologist's most interesting task.**" (p. 3)
- The associationist approach to unification (**Path #2**) does not fare much better as an explanatory scheme:
 - If we return to the topic of memory (our "Recollective Power"), the associationist can indeed speak meaningfully of memory "cues", which might help account for why some memories come more readily to mind in certain contexts than do others (e.g., a Beatles song that I just heard on the radio in my office brings back memories of time spent at my Grandparents' home).
 - "But this does not explain the effects of fever, exhaustion, hypnotism, old age, and the like."
 - "...in general, the pure associationist's account of our mental life is almost as bewildering as that of the pure spiritualist. This multitude of ideas, existing absolutely, yet clinging together, and weaving an endless carpet of themselves, like dominoes in ceaseless change, or the bits of glass in a kaleidoscope, **-whence do they get their fantastic laws of clinging, and why do they cling in just the shapes they do?**"
- Associationists can appeal to "the order of experience in the outer world" to account for our "dance of ideas" (p. 3).
 - "But the slightest reflection shows that phenomena 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 undergone it, we shall never know of its having been." (p. 4)

- **"The experiences of the body are thus one of the conditions of the faculty of memory being what it is."** (p. 4)
 - So, "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. The spiritualist and the associationist must both be 'cerebralists,' to the extent at least of admitting that certain peculiarities in the way of working of their own favorite principles are explicable only by the fact that the brain laws are a codeterminant of the result." (p. 4)
- **"Our first conclusion, then, is that a certain amount of brain-physiology must be presupposed or included in Psychology"** (p. 5).
- But it is not simply the case that physiological explanations can be found for psychological phenomena. It is also true that mental states can influence our physiology.
 - e.g., "mental states occasion...changes in the calibre of blood-vessels, or alteration in the heartbeats, or processes more subtle still, in glands and viscera." (p. 5).
- **"Our psychology must therefore take account not only of the conditions antecedent to mental states, but of their resultant consequences as well."** (p. 5)
 - Mental States <-- --> Physiology

What, though, is a mental state?

- ***"No actions but such as are done for an end, and show a choice of means, can be called indubitable expressions of Mind"*** (p. 11)
 - "We all use this test to discriminate between intelligent and mechanical performance. We impute no mentality to sticks and stones, because they never seem to move *for the sake* of anything..." (p. 8).
 - **"I shall then adopt this as the criterion by which to circumscribe the subject matter of his work so far as action enters into it"** (p. 11).
 - "Many nervous performances will be therefore unmentioned, as being purely physiological" (p. 11)