



WILLIAM JAMES

The Art of Being Wise

William James was a pioneering American psychologist and philosopher who wrote influential books on the young science of psychology, the psychology of religious experience and mysticism, and the philosophy of pragmatism.

(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_James#Writings).

One of the most influential Americans of his time, William James was much more than just a psychologist and philosopher. Considered to be the father of modern American psychology, James was also a physician, a naturalist, an artist, a religious thinker, a psychic researcher and a drug experimenter, as well as a writer, lecturer and professor. A man of forceful intellect but deep emotional conflicts, James attempted to balance his rational mind with his intense need to create spiritual meaning in his life. – (website.lineone.net/~williamjames1/).

The Early Years:

William James was born on the 11th of January, 1842 in New York City and as a youth he moved with his family from New York to London, Geneva, Paris, and other cities before finally settling down in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1866. All of this travel was possible because of the inherited wealth of his father, Henry James, Sr.

Believing strongly that his children should receive the best possible education, William James's father tried several private schools and home tutoring in New York, and then decided that a European education would be superior. The five James children began to attend different schools in Europe and the United States, but no school ever worked out quite as well as had been hoped. Fortunately though, young James and his

siblings became familiar with several different languages and cultures and benefited greatly from a stimulating home environment. Everyone in the James household was encouraged to engage in intellectual discussions and to express opinions freely, and to be prepared to defend them.

From boyhood, James liked to experiment with things, including various substances to determine their pharmacological effects on himself, and to mix chemicals indiscriminately. This led to his father concluding very early that William was destined for a career in science, and in 1861 William went off to study chemistry at Harvard. But he found chemistry to be difficult and not really absorbing, so James became more interested in physiology. Finally, James chose to study medicine because it offered both scientific training and a reasonable income. – (website.lineone.net/~williamjames1/).

In 1865, William accompanied a Harvard biologist to the Amazon in a specimen-hunting expedition. But the trip did not go well for James and seasickness and smallpox made him return home and resume his medical studies at Harvard. Unfortunately, the smallpox had left James with a weak eye and severe back pain, which prompted him to go to Germany in April, 1867 to take mineral baths there and to improve and perfect his German. With his back pain not improving, James returned home in 1868 in very bad spirits and merely went through the motions of completing his medical degree.

One of the ideas that most oppressed James during this low period of his life was the German physiologists' idea of a mechanistic universe. James believed that if all things in the universe were mechanistically determined, all of his physical and mental anguish was nothing more than the result of interacting physical particles, and that there was nothing he could personally

do to alter his fate. Fortunately, James's emotional recovery resulted when he happened upon an essay regarding free will, by the French philosopher, Charles Renouvier. James therefore adopted a belief in free will for the rest of his life. Evaluation of ideas in terms of this new-found tool would become a life-long habit for James, and the foundation of his philosophy of pragmatism in years to come. – (website.lineone.net/~williamjames1/).

According to pragmatism, the truth or meaning of an idea or a proposition lies in its observable practical consequences, rather than in anything metaphysical. – (atheism.about.com/od/philosophyschoolsystems/p/pragmatism.htm).

James's Teachings:

A born teacher, James was very far from authoritarianism and treated his students as intellectual equals. He was probably the first professor in the United States to ask for course evaluations from his students at the end of the semester. An important reason for James's success as a teacher lay in his approach to subject matter. From subject matter he constantly extracted what was useful for living and for understanding himself and his world more clearly.

Despite his relatively brief tenure as a psychologist, James's impact on the discipline was very significant. Rather than expounding a theory, he provided a point of view that captured the imagination of psychologists, especially in America. James directly inspired the American movement known as *functionalism*, which focused on the operational, rather than on the elemental character of the mind. From this point of view, individual differences in psychological characteristics were very important because they determined how well or poorly different people could