

Chapter V

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WILLIAM JAMES

IN the meantime, there was William James. In a sense, James both precedes and follows Titchener in American psychology. He was older than Titchener by twenty-five years; he published *The Principles of Psychology*, his major contribution, in 1890, two years before Titchener came to Cornell; and he died in 1910, when Titchener's power was at its height. Yet the two men stood for influences which were parallel rather than successive, and which have in fact never really met.

Unquestionably the teachings of James reach farther back into the past than do Titchener's, into the old metaphysical psychology that Titchener so cleanly leaves behind; but apparently they are destined to extend farther into the future, for they continue to flourish with a vigor and freshness that makes them relevant to the newest problems. The psychology of James is psychology in transition. It shows the marks of metaphysics, but it is a movement toward science. For James, less intent on formal correctness than on getting directly at the material he was studying, turned naturally in his inquiries toward concrete experience both for cues and for evidence. Whereas Titchener was intent chiefly on making the new psychology a science, James was more concerned that the new science be psychology.

It is impossible to place James in any of the well-marked lines of psychological development in progress in his day. He was neither the founder nor the adherent of any school.

Primarily he was an individual, and it was primarily as an individual that he exerted his influence on psychology. However engrossed he became in a movement, however enthusiastic about its import, he was never overwhelmed by it; he remained incorrigibly himself. He was keenly alive to all the psychological enterprises going forward in his day—always interested, and by turns sympathetic, amused, critical, and admiring. He discriminated and appraised, rejected and accepted, but he never lost himself, either in his enthusiasms or in his aversions. Yet he was not in any sense aloof. He was in the thick of psychology in its turbulent and factious youth, but he never lost his individuality and his independence.

The relation of James to the new experimental psychology of the Wundtian school is strongly characteristic of his attitude. To most psychologists of the time, the experimental psychology that Wundt sanctioned was in some way decisive. Either as adherents or dissenters, they were drawn into the current of its thought. Even men like Brentano and Stumpf derive part of their importance from their relation to it, and their positions are significant with reference to it. It is the psychology with which their views are compared and contrasted. But such statements can hardly be made of James. His thought developed independently of the new experimental psychology, took full cognizance of it, dismissed parts of it, included and assimilated large masses of it; but it was not transformed by it. There is a trace of Yankee isolation in James's psychology, and more than a trace of Yankee independence in his good-humored refusal to succumb to prestige suggestion.

A similar attitude marks his relations to other schools—in particular to British associationism and to French psychiatry. The pages of *The Principles* are dotted with the names of the British writers and strewn with acknowledg-

ments of indebtedness to their insights and observations. Yet James did not write in the British tradition; and he was definitely not an associationist. In the same spirit of appreciation, generously enthusiastic yet judicial, he turned to the work of the French psychiatrists. He believed that in their dealings with psychopathic personalities, especially in their work with dissociation and multiple personality, they were making discoveries of the utmost importance; he was strongly convinced that the psychology of the morbid has much to contribute to psychology in general. But though he plunged into the lore of the abnormal and the not quite normal, he never limited his attention to its problems. Again he showed that blend of appreciativeness and independence which has made him at once the most catholic and the most individual of psychologists.

There is, in fact, something of the same independent attitude in James's dealings with psychology as a whole. James ranks with the greatest psychologists—some place him first—yet even professionally psychology did not occupy him exclusively. He began his career, it will be remembered, not as a psychologist, but as a biologist, and it was while he was teaching anatomy in the Harvard Medical School, that he made a place in his laboratory for psychological experiments and thus started almost by accident the first psychological laboratory. The definite shift of his interest toward psychology is marked by his undertaking in 1878 to write *The Principles of Psychology*, a task which occupied him for twelve years. During this time, however, he became interested in philosophy; or rather, philosophy, which had attracted him from his early youth, claimed more and more of his attention. Naturally enough, his official positions at Harvard did not quite keep pace with his changing interests. While he was an instructor in anatomy, he was conducting psychological experiments. While he was work-

ing on *The Principles of Psychology*, he was made professor of philosophy. A year before *The Principles* was published, his title was changed to professor of psychology; but by that time his interest had so definitely shifted to philosophy that his title was changed back to professor of philosophy. There is no doubt that after publishing *The Principles*, James ceased to be chiefly interested in psychology. All the questions worth answering, he said, were in philosophy. For him, psychology had been a phase. Though he was one of the most potent influences in shaping the new science of psychology, and though for a time he served it ardently and well, in the end he called it a "nasty little science."

It is not surprising, therefore, that to some psychologists James is at times disconcerting. He is recognized as one of the greatest of their number, yet he openly violated some of their strongest prohibitions. For one thing, he wandered into fields of investigation not considered above suspicion—into the doubtful region of psychical research, for example, which has always been regarded as faintly disreputable. James was never overawed by academic taboos. If he wanted to investigate the possibility of communication with a spirit world, he did so; if he felt impelled to discuss free-will in a chapter on attention, he followed his impulse; and if he was faced by a question on which there were as yet no conclusive experimental or statistical data, he did not cautiously refrain from speculation. He was far more likely to observe shrewdly, and then to guess at the drift of the available evidence, trusting his intellect to fill in the gaps—sometimes rather large—and to get the hang of the situation as best it could. In following this method, he had a way of developing conceptions, like the James-Lange theory of the emotions, that were enormously stimulating to research. He also had a way of anticipating future discov-

eries; his chapter on the stream of thought contains excellent descriptions of the "imageless thoughts" subsequently discovered in psychological experiments. And in spite of this practice, James could not be accused of playing fast and loose with facts. He stated fact as fact and speculation as speculation, and though he often broke through the particular restrictions of the science of the day, he was fundamentally of a scientific turn of mind. Whatever his subject-matter, he addressed himself to it with an eye to raw facts and with a gift for faithful observation that the most austere scientists have recognized. But he also had a way of coming out on the side of the angels on a question that science could not answer. He was so alive to human hopes and desires that he could not help giving them a chance.

Indeed, the personality of James permeates his thinking, and his writings bear the unmistakable stamp of his temperament. But this does not mean that his thought was swamped by emotion. No one could recognize more surely than James the difference between intellect and emotion or that between fact and preference. It was indeed a perception of the difference, not a confusion regarding it, that made him so insistent on the recognition of the rôle of temperament and preference in intellectual activities. His loyalty to facts made him recognize this fact among others, but it also made it impossible for him to accede to the pretensions of the intellect to pure and absolute rationality.

It is not easy to describe the personality of James. Perhaps as good a starting-point as any is his stand on this very matter of the rôle of the intellect in human affairs. On the question of intellectualism versus empiricism, James was for empiricism and against intellectualism, to put the matter in terms of unqualified contrast. He was strongly convinced that experience must serve both as the starting-point and as the verification of thought. This belief appears

in his philosophy as well as in his psychology, for the appeal to the immediately given lies at the basis both of his logic and of his metaphysics—of pragmatism and of radical empiricism; and though the publication of *The Principles* antedated the working-out of these theories, the tendencies they represent were distinctly present in his psychological thinking. For reasons related to this same point of view, James was opposed to determinism as contrasted with freewill; he was inclined to trust the immediate feeling that something is actually being decided in attention and will, that human life is not the "dull rattling off of a chain." Determinism he recognized as an enormously convenient simplification of the universe and as, therefore, a tool that appeals strongly to the intellect. But to James the intellect, as but one of the many phenomena in a complex world, had no right to impose its demands on the character of reality in general. He recognized the intellect as one of man's ways of dealing with his environment; but he recognized it as one among many, and one that had a definite and limited place in human nature as a whole. His refusal to take the claims of the intellect too seriously—especially any expression of those claims in an officially sanctioned academic opinion—often made him the champion of lost causes against the entrenched intellectual respectability of the day. It was his opinion that nothing that presented itself as a possibility should be dismissed without a hearing. Santayana, one of his colleagues in philosophy at Harvard, said of him:

"Philosophy for him had a Polish constitution; so long as a single vote was cast against the majority, nothing could pass. The suspense of judgment which he had imposed on himself as a duty, became almost a necessity. I think it would have depressed him if he had had to confess that any important question was finally settled. He would still

have hoped that something might turn up on the other side, and that just as the scientific hangman was about to despatch the poor convicted prisoner, an unexpected witness would ride up in hot haste, and prove him innocent."¹

All this goes back to a radical democracy in James's nature. Every man, every idea, every moment of experience, must have its chance to speak out and be recognized. This democracy, this unfeigned desire that all be counted somehow—all experiences, all men, no matter how disreputable in the eyes of the savants—was probably his fundamental prejudice. He seemed actuated by a desire to be faithful to all, and the desire appears not only in his relations to people—his colleagues, his pupils, his friends—but also in his dealings with ideas.

For James's attitude toward ideas is above all democratic. He receives them with courtesy and entertains them with interest, genuinely bent on knowing them as they are. He cannot accept them all, he does not pretend to like them all, but he is determined that all shall have a hearing; and when he dismisses those he must, he takes leave of them, sometimes almost regretfully, with knowledge of their strength as well as of their weakness. He has the same engaging manner of dealing on terms of equality with people, including his reader. He flatteringly assumes that the reader is his intellectual equal and that the reader, the author, the learned scholars whose views are under discussion, are all engaged in the common enterprise of trying to get to the bottom of whatever absorbing topic is being considered. Because all are equals, it is possible to be both generous and unsparing. In a society of equals, no one need be overtender of another's feelings. Any one may be called to account, for every one can defend himself. The tone of James's controversial writing is that of justice between

¹ George Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States*, 82.

equals, of fair play on an intellectual plane. For this reason James, as has frequently been said, can state an opponent's position better than can his opponent himself; and for the same reason he can criticize it with relentless thoroughness. In criticism, as in everything else, his thoroughness does not permit him to stop short of doing his utmost. He does his foeman the honor of exerting his full strength against him.

Perhaps the thoroughness with which James treats a question requires a word of comment, chiefly because the rapidity and freshness of his style sometimes give the impression that his statements are unconsidered. His swift characterizations, his sharply illuminating insights, his quick thrusts, all suggest something going at top speed, directed only by the impulse of the moment. But no impression could be farther from the truth. James's writing is exquisitely careful. He was almost painfully conscientious about it. He kept his manuscripts and labored over them, refusing to let them go until they said exactly what he wanted them to say. He always resented the criticism that his writings were not carefully planned. For all his delight in the insight of the moment, he spared himself no drudgery, whether of working through masses of factual material he considered dull, or of following long lines of argument and speculation he thought pompous and empty. In spite of his feeling that much of the work of the German laboratories was laborious futility—he used to call some of the dissertations "elaborations of the obvious"—he became thoroughly conversant with that branch of psychological literature. Any one who goes through the foot-notes of *The Principles* will see how completely James was master of the psychology of his day; and any one who examines the argumentative portions of the book—his consideration of the automaton theory, the mind-stuff theory, freewill,

and brain localization—will see how carefully James considers hypotheses suggested by other points of view than his own. There is a surprising carefulness in the work of James, a carefulness which is undoubtedly related to the fact that he found it difficult to accept anything as proved and final. His breadth, his thoroughness, his carefulness, and his high seriousness are as much a part of his complex personality as are his vivacity and acuteness.

In his direct personal relationships James was as effective as in his writings. His *Letters*² show how many lines of communication he kept open with friends; and they reveal, too, the scope of his interests. His students found him extraordinarily stimulating. In his class-room, as in his books, he assumed a society of equals. It was not his custom to deliver formal lectures, and often he plunged into brilliant digressions suggested by the situation of the moment. Sometimes he went rather far afield in his pursuit of a topic that he found absorbing, and one day a student, attempting to bring him back from one of these excursions, burst out, "But, Professor, to be serious for a moment . . ." Plainly the atmosphere of James's class-room was such as to make one forget the ordinary class-room formalities. It is as characteristic of James as anything about him that he did not found a school. He stimulated students to think—not necessarily to think *his* thoughts. He preferred to throw his thoughts and theories out into the world and let them take their chances with other thoughts and theories. He did not seek to give them the backing of a school; he let them rely on their own naked strength.

James's psychology is set forth in its most complete form in the two volumes of *The Principles of Psychology*. It is often said that this work is unsystematic, that it lacks

² *The Letters of William James*, ed. by his son, Henry James.

organization, or, at least, that whatever organization it possesses is not a matter of first importance. Certainly the book does not create the impression of a closely articulated structure; rather it suggests a series of insights, of penetrating flashes into the depths of the subject. Almost every chapter can be read by itself as a separate treatise on its special topic; and with few exceptions each chapter reads as if its subject-matter were the most important part of psychology, as if just here, by this approach, the way to the very heart of the subject is to be found. James himself believed that he was primarily a "creature of *aperçus*," and *The Principles* is clearly the work of such a creature. Though it was the most exhaustive treatise on general psychology in its day, it is, at its best, a series of acute perceptions and penetrating insights into a new and little-explored department of knowledge.

All this is true, yet the lack of organization must not be overemphasized. For throughout the book there is a pattern, faintly indicated and never obtrusive, but nevertheless significant. Undoubtedly some of the comments that the book was not carefully planned rose from the fact that it did not follow the conventional plan of beginning with units like sensations or simple ideas and, out of those units, constructing the more complex states of consciousness. But it was an essential part of James's teaching that this procedure is unjustified; that the proper starting-point is experience as it is immediately given, the stream of consciousness as it flows before perception, not the simple sensation. The "simple sensation" or "simple idea," James always insisted, is not to be found in unanalyzed, unintellectualized experience; it is a product of abstraction, arrived at after long and sophisticated study. Besides, he believed that before psychology proper could be discussed, it was necessary to clear the ground. For he could not take it for granted, as Titchener

did, that psychology was already a science, write a brief statement of the mind-body relation, and without further ado, write psychology. James was an American and a philosopher as well as a psychologist, and he knew too well the philosophical tradition in America to believe that it could be disposed of lightly. He took American psychology not as it ought to be, but as he found it; as mental philosophy based on associationism, often allied with Calvinism, and sometimes, in its more sophisticated forms, with transcendentalism and absolute idealism. James not only knew the American tradition, but it was a part of himself. For him it was impossible to sweep aside the problems of the mind as they presented themselves to the American public of his day.

Briefly, the outline of *The Principles* is this. The first six chapters of the first volume serve largely to clear the ground for psychology proper. Regarding it as his first task to get the necessary biological conceptions before the reader, James discusses those aspects of nervous activity which he considers most relevant to mental life; and in this connection he introduces his famous chapter on habit—a chapter which develops the thesis that mental life, in fact, all human conduct, is largely determined by the tendency of the nervous system to be so modified by each action that every subsequent action of the same sort is a little easier than its predecessor. James next prepares the reader for the scientific point of view by discussing the chief metaphysical conceptions of mind. He considers the automaton theory, the mind-dust theory, the material-monad theory, and the soul theory; but he ends by rejecting all metaphysical hypotheses concerning the mind-body relation, and by contenting himself, for the purposes of psychology, with “a blank unmediated correspondence, term for term, of the succession of states of consciousness with the succession of total brain processes.” In other

words, he accepts both states of consciousness and brain-processes as phenomena in the natural world; and he believes that since psychology is a natural science, not a system of metaphysics, it may note and accept whatever relationships it finds without feeling obliged to account for their existence.

In the rest of the volume, James deals with psychology proper. He discusses methods of investigation in a chapter at once shrewd and tolerant, significantly entitled “The Methods and Snares of Psychology.” A chapter called “The Stream of Thought”—in about the middle of the volume, it is well to notice—describes the subject-matter of psychology as James sees it. The theme of the chapter is that consciousness is not composed of discrete bits joined together, but that it is a continuous, flowing current. The stream of thought is described as having five chief characteristics: it is personal; it is changing; it is sensibly continuous; it deals with objects not itself; and it is always choosing among them, welcoming, rejecting, accentuating, selecting. In a sense, the rest of the first volume is a development of this chapter. The immediately personal character of consciousness is discussed in a chapter on the self—a chapter which directly follows that on the stream of thought, instead of being placed at the end of the book, where the chapter on the self is usually found in treatises on psychology. The selective nature of consciousness is treated in the three chapters, “Attention,” “Conception,” and “Discrimination and Comparison”; and the rest of the volume deals with various aspects of the change and continuity of the stream of thought. The chapter “Association” treats the associative processes not as couplings of “simple ideas” or discrete bits of consciousness, but as merging physiological processes in the nervous system. This chapter, in its attack on the theory that consciousness is composed of discrete bits, repeats and