

A Western Mind-Presenting as American Philosopher and Psychologist William James

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This essay is intended to expand on the oral presentation given on August 14, 2019, specifically focusing on the concepts of American philosopher and psychologist, William James, and the application of these concepts to modern American psychology. The essay is presented as first person William James who announced his ideas through time travel.

My dear colleagues. What a joy it is to see all of you assembled from around the world. And you all identify yourself as psychologists. Amazing!! As you might know, I formed the first psychology program when I was a faculty member at Harvard – you know that educational institutions just down the road from you in Cambridge. I had been wandering around in my life as a physician – and not a very good one—and then as an instructor in philosophy. I was somewhat more successful in this endeavor. I suspect I never would have gotten very far in my career as a university professor if it wasn't for the prominence and esteem in which people of some influence held my father. It probably didn't hurt that my brother was a quite successful writer. I wonder if his novels are still being read. Actually, I am even more interested in knowing if my own writings about psychology are still being read?

Psychology as an American Thing

And to think that psychology as a discipline has entered the world of Asia. I always thought that Psychology was very much an American thing. You know, a strong dose of pragmatism—what can we do to fix things!! And it is all about the spirit and identify of the individual. I have no patience for the kind of heavy-handed theology being preached by Jonathan Edwards and his kind. They are all about the limits of human choice and human destiny. They think that some

God in the sky has complete claim over their soul. I firmly believe that the primary function of human consciousness is making choices. We are fully free to determine our own destiny. We are conscious human beings precisely because we must make choices and must take actions based on these choices. There is nothing – absolutely nothing – more important than the human ability to select our own pathway. If there is a God and if that God is benevolent then he or she wants us to live in freedom and has granted us the dignity to live with the challenge of choice. I find this basic tenant to be of utmost importance.

Freud and Jung

I had the opportunity to meet that fellow from Vienna and his colleague from Switzerland – what was his name. Yes, Sigmund Freud and the other fellow was Carl Jung. They were invited here by my friend, G. Stanley Hall, who has been president of Clark University --another Massachusetts educational institution. Freud and Jung offered some interesting ideas and I greatly admire the way in which they challenge existing European notions about human nature. And both came from the profession of medicine – like I did. So, I admire the way they have based their concepts in the practice of trying to heal people. This keeps them more grounded than many of the more theoretical philosophers of their time. That is why I have gravitated to psychology. It puts some muscles on the frail body of contemporary philosophy.

I do wonder what has happened to their ideas and practices. Have they remained odd and unaccepted voices in the wilderness of human knowledge, or have they made any headway? My major concern with their ideas, goes back to my fundamental tenant. Humans are decision-makers and control their own destiny. I worry that this whole gobble-gook about unconscious processes and boys wanting to make love to their mothers is a bit off-putting. Freud and Jung would seem to be replacing the wrathful God that Jonathan Edwards preaches about, with an equally vindictive unconscious monster – the Id – that pulls humankind back to the evolutionary state that the fellow from England, Charles Darwin, declares is our heritage. I am also a bit uncomfortable with all of the focus on sex in the work of Freud (more than Jung). I am still a bit of a Puritan when it comes to any discussion about love making or the emotion called “lust.”

Psychology of Choice and Freedom

Let me return to my own perspectives on the field of psychology. I believe that when people have choices to make, then there will be significant individual differences. I am particularly interested in the differences that occur in the formation of religious beliefs. I was asked to provide a series of lectures in Scotland—the prestigious Gifford Lectures. I turned these lectures into a book called “Varieties of Religious Experiences”. It is of some interest to note that my book came out about the same time as Freud’s book on dreams. I think this is some of the best work done by both of us. It was at the start of the 20th Century when both books were published. Perhaps this was the century for the flourishing of a new discipline: psychology. One of the main theses of my religion book was that we must each find our distinctive pathway through life. For some of us, the pathway leads to something I call the twice-born pathway. We make one or more major changes in our life and shift, like Saul in the Old Testament, to a new faith and new perspective. We become the new-born Paul. Twice-born is about conversion. I know about this process, because of the work done by my father as a famous pastor, the founder of a church, and someone who was very demanding of all his children.

For under the harsh dictatorship of my father, I found myself struggle to gain control. I wanted to be free. Perhaps that is why I am a strong believer in the human right of choice. Those people who are twice-born are often struggling with their own identity in life and are going through many profound life transitions. I myself was wandering about in my adult life, being uncertain about what I wanted to do in life. Some people might even have called me a spoiled “dilatant.” I went through several profound “twice-born” transformations myself—one of these transformations being my turning from medicine and philosophy to psychology. I wonder if any of us would be here today if it wasn’t for my transformation and the creation of psychology as an independent discipline.

Then there are those people who are “once-born.” They move through life with a single-minded purpose. They are the “healthy-minded” who are clear about their priorities and hold a set of values that remain constant throughout their life. On the one hand, we might think of these people as less interesting than the twice-born. I suspect that my brother, Henry James, would much rather write about the twice-born who struggle with a sickened soul. On the other hand, perhaps those of us who are twice-born envy the once-born. We would like to live a life that is a

bit more boring and a bit less eventful. We would like our choices to be a bit easier. Perhaps the Freudians and Jungians are right about the powerful hold that unconscious processes have over us – especially if we are twice-born.

Pragmatism and Emotions

I want to finish this brief presentation by commenting a bit on the label that has been assigned to me as a “pragmatist.” I must confess that I am pragmatic. I believe that psychology should be useful in our daily lives. As a pragmatist, I focus on action: we know something is real and know of which it is composed, when we act upon it and notice what effect is observed. My colleague, John Dewey, at Columbia University in New York City, holds a similar view. My pragmatism and focus on action show up, for instance, in my ideas about emotions. I think that our emotions arise from our actions rather than the other way around. We are aroused, make decisions, act, and then experience emotions. If I am walking through the woods and confront a large bear, then I am immediately aroused physiologically, I begin to run away from the bear. While running away, I say to myself, in essence, I must be afraid because I am running away from the bear. I am not first afraid and then start running. I don’t have time to make an assessment about my feelings. If I took this time to reflect, then the bear might eat me for dinner. Rather, I am activated (aroused), make a rapid choice and take action. I run and then I assign an emotion. This is American pragmatism. This is an important perspective and a way to avoid being eaten by bears (especially here in the state you now call Maine – very beautiful but also very much a wilderness).

International Experience

Actually, I am not quite done. I want to comment for a minute on all of you coming from different countries. My brother, Henry James, and I traveled with my father quite often to Europe. Henry wrote about the American and European cultures quite a bit. These are two quite different worlds. But I understand that many of you at this Gathering come from across the Pacific Ocean. These are even bigger cultural differences. This is remarkable. Very few

Americans when I was alive had either the money or the time to travel across the Pacific Ocean to Asia. Those of us living in Eastern America even find it hard to travel to Western America. I wonder what it must be like for you to spend time with one another coming from such different worlds. Or have the differences collapsed over the past century?

Then, there is my sister, Alice. She traveled very little. She was staying mostly at home. She led a very difficult life. She discovered very few pathways. Choice was not to be found in her life. It was very hard to be an intelligent woman living in the late 19th and early 20th Century in America – and Alice was much brighter than either Henry or me. Here is a picture of Alice that I carry with me all the time. She looks very sad in this picture – and she was often quite sad. Alice didn't live very long. She suffered from Hysteria and had breast cancer. As a way to deal with the pain, Alice took Opium and was eventually addicted to this horrible drug. I wonder if you are still having problems with opium?

Let me close this off by saying once again, how amazed I am that psychology has spread beyond the shores of North America. It is amazing that psychology traveled beyond even the confines of my Harvard Yard and my Cambridge Massachusetts community.

Thank you.