

Learning Guide

WILLIAM JAMES: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF POSSIBILITY with John J. McDermott

Introduction:

James wrote the first comprehensive textbook of psychology: Principles of Psychology

His insights encourage us to seek possibility in all beliefs and decisions

Field of Psychology-James opened many fields of inquiry that still are being discussed

Neuroscience: Brain functioning underlies all human behavior

Experimental psychology: James studied it and established a lab at Harvard

Behaviorism: James's study of habit underlies this field of psychology

Clinical psychology: James met with Freud and Jung and explored unconscious behavior

Constructivism: James believed that humans construct meaning

William James

Had an emotional crisis in early adulthood. Rejected suicide and declared that, "My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will."

Born 1842 to a wealthy family

Traveled extensively all his life

Spent his professional career as a professor at Harvard University

Habit

"Flywheel" of society, enables humans to live productively

Three parts of his discussion:

Plasticity: The ability of our brains to adapt to changing circumstances, enabling us to act in diverse ways

Routines: Actions that are frequently repeated together become connected and almost automatic. For instance: dressing ourselves

Habituation: Habits we share in common with other people enable us to live together. For instance: stopping at stop signs and sharing a common language. On an individual level habituation can result in unhealthy behaviors like alcoholism but also enables creativity as people develop skills that allow experimentation with alternatives

Stream of Consciousness

Consciousness: Our brains constantly process information in very personal ways when awake

Thinking does not occur in bits but is a streaming

Five points about James's conception of consciousness:

Consciousness is personal: We maintain an inner unity

Consciousness has a fringe and a focus: The "fringe" includes impressions on the edge of consciousness: nagging feelings, sixth sense, intuitions

Consciousness includes the apprehension of relationships:

Relations: Include concepts like "on", "next to" and "not" but also personal associations based on individual experiences such as the reaction to a glass of clear liquid

Relational fabric: Each of us has our own set of associations

Consciousness is selective: It welcomes, rejects and chooses from the inputs available

Consciousness deals with inner states and external realities: We have personal "takes" on experiences but we must realize that there are realities beyond ourselves

Will

Includes undertaking voluntary actions and thoughts

Alcoholism/addiction

Recovering person must will themselves to see a possibility of health

Bill W., founder of Alcoholics Anonymous was influenced by James

Legacy

Principles of Psychology published in 1890 when James was 1890

Varieties of Religious Experience is the most widely read of his books

Pragmatism: a philosophical stance developed by James, John Dewey and others

James died in 1910 at the age of 68

James's extensive work reminds us that each of us is always undergoing experience and being influenced by them and then, in turn, our inner and outer actions change our experiences. "As long as there is life, there is novelty and thus possibility."

