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The Routledge Guidebook to James's Principles of Psychology

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The Routledge Guidebook to James's *Principles of Psychology*

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In 1878 the New York publisher Henry Holt invited a relatively unknown assistant professor of physiology to write a textbook on “the new psychology” for his firm’s American Science Series. Although psychology was still subsumed under philosophy in the academic curricula of the time, Holt realized that ongoing developments were beginning to transform psychology into a more scientifically oriented discipline. A shrewd businessman, Holt wanted to take advantage of a potential new market for book buyers. He assumed that the author he had selected, William James, would need about six months to write this book. To his astonishment, James told him that he would need at least two years. When Holt reluctantly agreed, he had no idea that, in the end, it would take a full twelve years for James to complete his magisterial *Principles of Psychology*. The outcome – an immediate classic in the field – justified the wait.

By the time this classic work appeared in 1890, its author had long since become a highly regarded professor of philosophy at Harvard and had earned an extensive readership through the publication of earlier versions of various chapters in his book. As a result, *Principles* was highly anticipated – not only by Holt! – and quickly became an international bestseller, at least to the extent that a two-volume, 1,400-page, scholarly book could

become a bestseller. (After two initial printings of 1,800 copies, there were three more printings by 1899. In fact, *Principles* seems never to have gone out of print, surely a rare achievement that puts *Principles* in a very select group of nineteenth-century works, especially those of a scientific character.) Two years later, Holt published James's single-volume abbreviation of this lengthy text, which was soon dubbed "Jimmy" to distinguish it from the lengthier "James." This "briefer course" (which went through six printings by 1900) made the central arguments of *Principles* available to a much wider and more diverse audience, including especially undergraduate college students, many of whom were drawn to the rapidly developing field that James presented in such striking ways. For more than a generation, both versions of James's work played important roles in establishing the new psychology within academic and professional settings. It was the full-length *Psychology*, however, that became and remained the Bible of the field, spawning multiple lines of development within psychology, both scientific and applied. It also provoked new ideas and considerations among philosophers, at first in relation to psychological matters and later in relation to James's philosophical publications on pragmatism, pluralism, and radical empiricism. At the same time it was taken up by many writers, artists, social scientists, and others who sought a better understanding of the human mind and behavior. Over the years an astonishing range of individuals credited James's *Principles of Psychology* with stimulating their intellectual and creative lives. An illustrative list would include Bernard Berenson, Niels Bohr, Jorge Luis Borges, John Dewey, W. E. B. DuBois, Robert Frost, George Herbert Mead, Helen Keller, Walter Lippmann, Stephen C. Pepper, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, Lev Vygotsky, Alfred North Whitehead, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. More recent acknowledgments have come from Jacques Barzun, Antonio Damasio, Nelson Goodman, Hilary Putnam, Marilynne Robinson, Richard Rorty, and Oliver Sacks, among many others.

Time has done nothing to reduce the historical significance of James's *Principles*. It is universally considered one of the major points of transition between the old spiritualistic and associationistic psychologies that stretched back to Plato, Aristotle, and early

Christian thinkers, and the innovative scientific psychology that was emerging through the amalgamation of these traditions with modern physiology, evolutionary biology, experimental probings of normal psychological phenomena, and clinical observations of what James called “exceptional mental states.” *The Principles of Psychology* is also acknowledged to be a crucial text in the development of modern philosophy – in fact, it is the last text to be considered a classic in both psychology and philosophy – and it remains, as one notable scholar has said, “the best single work from which to learn the historical background of contemporary discussions in philosophical psychology.” Indeed, in this same author’s estimation, it is not only “the most stimulating and provocative [book] ever written in its area,” it is also “a seemingly inexhaustible source of ideas for philosophers of psychology” (Myers 1981, xl). The same can be said about its potential fruitfulness for psychologists.

Despite its acclaimed place in the histories of both psychology and philosophy, however, *The Principles of Psychology* is read today, if at all, in highly selective, piecemeal fashion, mirroring the hyper-specialization that pushed psychology and philosophy apart in the decades after James’s death and then began to separate subfields within each discipline. As a result, it seems fair to say that *Principles* is more often consulted than thoroughly studied these days. Whether exploring the roots of their own areas of interest or simply trolling for lively, apt quotations from one of the great stylists of the English language, physiological psychologists tend to restrict their reading of James’s *Principles* to his chapter regarding “The Functions of the Brain”; behaviorally oriented psychologists typically focus on his chapter regarding “Habit”; cognitive psychologists cite but aren’t quite sure what to do with his chapter on “The Stream of Thought”; personality and social psychologists tout his chapter on “The Consciousness of Self”; clinical psychologists are attracted to his chapters on “Emotion” and “Hypnotism”; and so on. All tend to ignore the chapters that fall outside their own narrowly defined domains, thus missing some of the insights they might gather from this classic work. Meanwhile, philosophers who read *Principles* do so, typically, in similarly limited ways, often in search of – or reaction against – the conceptual roots of the philosophical topics that concern them.

Against this backdrop, the premise of this book is that much of the value and potential contemporary relevance of *The Principles of Psychology* is embedded less in its instructive treatment of this or that topic, and more in the overarching vision conveyed by its various parts, when read and considered in unison. James had interesting things to say about many topics – about emotion, for instance, as well as thought – but what distinguishes his work, as contrasted with the specialized literature of our time, are the ways he treated topics, such as emotion and cognition, as being ineluctably linked in actual experience, an insight that has only recently been “rediscovered” in psychology and philosophy. The same kinds of insight regarding the linkages between body and mind, habit and thought, perception and conception, imagination and memory, consciousness and subconsciousness, attention and will, and self and others have been missed over the years by selective readers of *Principles*. Many recent developments in psychology and philosophy could have occurred earlier if *Principles* had continued to be read *as a whole* rather than *in parts*. James not only knew many things that have been forgotten, he also suggested many things that were admittedly conjectural yet highly probable, and remain so today, awaiting further investigation. In any case, James’s vision of the basic connectedness of psychological experience underlies my strategic decision, implemented throughout this book, to consider topics that he addressed within various combinations, while making occasional retrospective and prospective excursions to tighten the knots that connect his treatments to past and future developments in psychology and philosophy. Focusing primarily on just *two* topics at a time will undoubtedly simplify James’s vision – he, after all, saw *everything* as interrelated – but I cannot treat all the connections that James discussed within the scope of this book. Hopefully, proceeding in this manner rather than treating each topic separately will both clarify and exemplify the *kinds* of insight that can be taken with profit from James’s *Principles*, even today.

I have, of course, incurred many debts in the years leading up to the writing of this book. They reach back decades before I knew anything about William James. Although none of us can specify all of our important formative influences and obligations, any short

list of mine would include my parents Thomas and Betty Leary, my wife Marjorie and children Emily, Elizabeth, and Matthew, my teachers George Stocking, Jr., and Stephen Toulmin, and my sometime-mentor Sigmund Koch. This list could be expanded almost without end to include many scholars, only some of whom I know personally, whose research has informed my studies of James and his work. Among them are Francesca Bordogna, George Cotkin, Paul Croce, John Patrick Diggins, Rand Evans, Howard Feinstein, Russell B. Goodman, John Greenwood, David Hollinger, Alexander Klein, James Kloppenberg, Bruce Kuklick, James Livingston, John J. McDermott, Gerald E. Myers, Ralph Barton Perry, Hilary Putnam, Robert Richards, Joan Richardson, Robert D. Richardson, Richard Rorty, Charlene Haddock Seigfried, Linda Simon, Ignas Skrupskelis, Michael Sokal, Eugene Taylor, Bruce Wilshire, and William Woodward. And of course, good friends and intellectual colleagues, like Joseph Chinnici, Raymond Hilliard, and Hugh West, have made the passage of years both more pleasurable and profitable. Finally, I want to acknowledge the University of New Hampshire, where my professional journey started 40 years ago, and thank the University of Richmond, where I have worked for almost three decades, for various forms of support, both social and financial in nature.

Writing a book about a masterpiece written by someone who has earned my respect and admiration has inevitably stirred feelings of personal responsibility: primarily, to be as faithful as possible to the insights of this pioneer of both modern psychology and modern philosophy. To the extent that I have succeeded, I am pleased to think that some – hopefully many – who read this book will be moved by *my* words to seek out *his* words: to read James in the original, firsthand, without the filter of my account or anyone else's. The number of those who pick up "James" or "Jimmy" because of this book will be the ultimate measure of its success.

Just as James felt that any verbal formulation is "ever not quite" what needs to be said, I offer this book with a palpable sense of its insufficiency...yet with gratitude to have this opportunity to introduce others to one of the most interesting, charming, provocative, and consequential thinkers of the past few centuries.

Finally, I would like to add that I gladly accepted the invitation to write this book in appreciation of how much I have profited from similar efforts on the part of others, not just in guidebooks but more broadly in the kind of fundamental work that benefits and supports the understanding and work of others. To give but a few examples, I am referring to the kind of persistent, systematic, and too-often-unheralded efforts of individuals like Ignas Skrupskelis who has appended endlessly useful editorial notes to Harvard University Press's edition of James's works and to the University Press of Virginia's collection of James's letters; of Robert D. Richardson who, in addition to producing his marvelous intellectual biography of James, has patiently gathered and made available a comprehensive listing of the primary sources used throughout James's extensive body of work; and of Ermine Algaier who is now making annotations of Harvard University's collection of James's personal library. These and other such efforts will provide untold future scholars with the means to advance James scholarship upon a firm and previously unavailable foundation. This book is not precisely of the same sort, but I hope that it too will be useful to many others – to students, teachers, scholars, and simply interested persons alike – as they try to understand James's wide-ranging and still vibrant thoughts. I would like to think, for instance, that some scholars who may be working on *one* aspect of James's oeuvre will want to be sure that they are not distorting or overlooking the significance of some other aspects, and might therefore find it useful to read various chapters of this book. But no matter how useful this book proves to be, my reward, beyond the pleasure of introducing or re-introducing *The Principles of Psychology* to others, is to have spent so much time with an extraordinary man and mind.