

Eccentrics

William James: Depression, Boredom, Hidden Talents

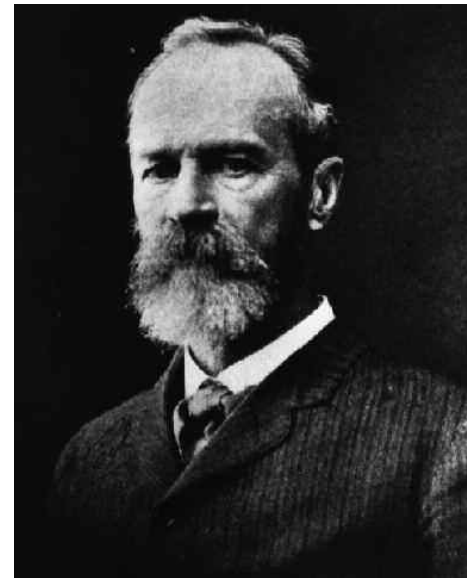
By Chloe Lizotte

Born in Manhattan in 1842, William James's life followed a meandering road full of unexpected forks before he discovered what he truly enjoyed. In his eccentric father's quest to ensure that his children received an unparalleled education, William's family had relocated transatlantic four times before he turned 18. Henry James Sr. chose to move whenever he noticed William gravitating towards indulging his interest in the arts such as when, as a teenager, William became enamored with the idea of becoming a painter. This aspiration did not fit in with Henry Sr.'s vision of William's future, in a realm such as science or philosophy. So, frequent changes of continent characterized the driven Henry's attempt to divert his son's attention from artistic pursuits.

Ultimately, to Henry's delight, William chose science upon enrolling at Harvard. However, William soon found himself bored with these studies so that, after a few years, he moved on to Harvard Medical School, thinking medicine would be better able to sustain his monetary needs for the future. Still uninspired after a year studying medicine, William chose to accompany world-class geologist Louis Agassiz on a year-long voyage to Brazil. Perhaps, he thought, this would awaken in him a hidden interest in the natural world. But the excursion only sent the teetering William into a downward spiral of depression and homesickness as he found the collection of samples and specimens to be just as dull as his science studies had been. So he returned to the United States after eight months in South America to resume, and finish, medical school.

All this difficulty with determining his true interests led to a deep depression that William would struggle with throughout his life, most notably *after* graduating medical school in his late 20s. At age 30 however, now a professor of physiology at Harvard, he suddenly found himself in a job for which he had a natural talent. With a unique mercurial and energetic style of teaching, he soon became popular with the students. After few trips to Europe in the following years to study with a prominent German physician Herman von Helmholtz, he experienced a realization that he was in fact fascinated with psychology. By 1875, as if in tribute to his father's eccentric genes, he'd built the first ever laboratory of *experimental* psychology in the United States and began teaching this subject to Harvard's students, famously remarking at one point that "the first lecture on psychology [he had ever heard was] the first [he] ever gave."

Fifteen years later, William published the work for which he is now most famous, a 1200-page, two-volume tome entitled *The Principles of Psychology*. Written over a 12-year period, *Principles* served as a comprehensive introduction to psychology, incorporating many original views on the subject, including his concept that one's consciousness is a double-sided sense of self, differentiating between objective and subjective personal viewpoints. This kind of extremely open-minded approach to research led him in bizarre directions, such as attending séances to learn more about human psychology in terms of spirituality. William later wrote a more succinct, one-volume version of



Principles entitled *Psychology: The Briefer Course*. This version was met with only a warm reception, however, some critics commenting that the tone of William's work was far too informal. Renowned psychologist Wilhelm Wundt acerbically remarked, "It is literature – it is beautiful – but it is not psychology."

Later in his life, William branched out from psychology to philosophy as he began lecturing in support of "pragmatism," that is, the belief that ideas are only valid if they are practical and useful in one's life. 1907 saw the publication of his book of the same name *Pragmatism*, an extensive elaboration on this subject.

Now credited as the one who brought both psychology and pragmatism into the public eye, William James's accomplishments in life are awe-inspiring considering he began as an indecisive young man with no idea what he truly wanted, conquering that by allowing his eccentric side to bloom and grow. As he once said, "The best argument I know for an immortal life is the existence of a man who deserves one." Though he may not have acknowledged it himself, William James certainly has come to fit this definition because, true to his words, his ideas and accomplishments immortalized him in the end.

For more information on
William James, visit
www.squidoo.com/william-james

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