

Review of *The Routledge Guidebook to James's Principles of Psychology*, by David Leary. New York: Routledge, 2018. 364 pp. US\$26.

In 1878, publisher Henry Holt asked young physiology professor William James to write a brief classroom text on psychology for the American Science Series. James's careful work grew into a "break away from the famous 'Series,'" into what he called his "dropsical mass."<sup>1</sup> The two-volume *Principles of Psychology* was a comprehensive review of the new science of psychology with artful commentary on the human mind and behavior. In a similar way, Routledge enlisted David Leary to write a classroom guidebook to *The Principles* for their Guides to the Great Books series, but the veteran psychologist and student of James has created a thorough evaluation of James's classic text in the contexts of the science and philosophy of his time, and with profiles of the trajectory of James's own development and insightful observations on the book's long shadow, all while maintaining the concision and clarity that make this book suitable for classroom use.<sup>2</sup>

Readers will meet Leary's clarity at first glance. The book is organized into three sections with concise titles: "Background," "Principles," and "Elaborations." And the chapters within these sections each have paired topics, including "Substance and Style," "Psychology and Philosophy," "Perception and Conception," "Cognition and Emotion," and "Known and Unknown." These clear "bundles of two" also offer a subtle response to debating points in

James scholarship:<sup>3</sup> how to understand his openness to diverse, even contrasting, points of view?

James has a reputation for ambivalence when confronting stark choices and for inconsistency in theoretical exposition. Part of this reputation stems from his own indecisiveness, which contributed to his youthful troubles. However, as he matured, he resolved to live “without any *guarantee*,” which allowed him to cultivate what I call his “decisive ambivalence” with eagerness to hear out different perspectives for integration of contrasts.<sup>4</sup> Part of his reputation for inconsistency also reflects the way he responded to his immediate contexts. He wrote when professional standards in psychology, philosophy, and other fields were just starting to form, and he continued to think with spontaneity despite these trends.<sup>5</sup>

James often wrote with an informal style, drawing upon experiential introspective evidence, with metaphors and personal references, including from his own life. This posture produced mixed feelings among his colleagues. Fellow pioneering psychologist Wilhelm Wundt said, on first reading *The Principles*, “It is literature, it is beautiful, but it is not psychology.”<sup>6</sup> Other professional psychologists went still further; University of Pennsylvania clinical psychologist Lightner Witmer even called James’s tendency to support informal, practical psychological advice a “national peril.”<sup>7</sup>

Trends in James scholarship have echoed these assessments. For the first half century after his death in 1910, especially as psychology developed rigorous scientific schools of inquiry and as analytic interpretations came to dominate philosophy, James was widely regarded as an adept popularizer, but not a serious theorist. More recently, Richard Gale presents the most blunt account of James’s “divided self” while Charles Taylor declares that James is “our great philosopher of the cusp,” eager to move to the boundaries of disputes while bringing his “wide sympathy” for hearing out disagreements.<sup>8</sup>

The object of James’s inquiries, experience, in all its robust variability, is itself full of inconsistencies, and so, as a messenger of these divergent accounts, he invites such varied interpretations.

James maintained that theories translate experiences into more orderly portraits, less true to the abundant reality, but allowing for better understanding and management of those experiences. He illustrated this in a disarming account of the tangible experience of his audience bringing both their bodies and their minds to one of his lectures. He imagined applause at the end from “joy . . . when it is all over,” when his listeners could simply move physically and then would be “at last free to escape from the sound of the lecturer’s voice,” free to carry its intellectual sparks back to their own thoughts.<sup>9</sup> With his introspective method in *The Principles*, James remained “close to the descriptive, empirical level,” as Leary points out, which enabled him to punctuate his reports on rigorous scientific research with metaphors and everyday accounts that served to illustrate the lived experience of psychological processes.<sup>10</sup> This allowed for more strategic use of theory, rather than avowed commitment to particular orientations.

Leary is evenhanded on the diverse interpretations of James that have appeared in the wake of his influential work, and he even incorporates them into his narrative. The paired topics in each of Leary’s chapters are not only “for the sake of expository convenience,” but also they suggest his judgment that James’s “thinking was admittedly ‘wobbly’ and ‘inconsistent’ at times,” and yet James’s handling of these often-contrasting pairs shows his urge to understand how these topics are “intimately connected.”<sup>11</sup> Leary’s accommodation of different interpretations is most evident in his chapter on “Mind and Body,” whose focus on the question of dualism is so central to understanding *The Principles* and the field of psychology in general that aspects of Leary’s approaches in that chapter also appear throughout his book.

Leary depicts diverse ways of understanding James as “three different stories about mind and body in *The Principles of Psychology*” itself.<sup>12</sup> The first is his “positivist approach,” explicitly dualist, with “parallel descriptions” of “mental phenomena as they are actually experienced” and their “physiological correlates,” while “eschewing” any explanations about the “relations of mind and body.”<sup>13</sup> The second story, appearing “here and there in the midst of

the first story,... ascribes interaction to the mind and body,” with causal impacts of mental and bodily states on each other, a perspective, Leary points out, that is actually “central... to James’s vision of the human person.”<sup>14</sup> The third story “reduces even further” and even “eliminate[s] the gap ... between mind and body.”<sup>15</sup> Because this non-dualism involved “a revolution in the way of thinking about mind and body,” Leary suggests that James in *The Principles* expresses this “subtext” story cautiously, for “exploring how he could move beyond traditional dualism, and so these subtle expressions of non-dualism” are steps “toward James’s own radical empiricism.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, Leary depicts how the “undifferentiated ‘sciousness’ of which he had spoken tentatively in *Principles*,” served as “his incipient radical empiricism,” with unself-conscious “pure experience” serving as the raw material for both mental and bodily experiences.<sup>17</sup> Leary devotes much of his last chapter to how James would have revised his major psychology text in light of his explicit non-dualism in the theorizing of his last decade.

Leary explains James’s commitment to his positivist story as based on his urge to present a psychology free of metaphysics. This allowed *The Principles* to “circumvent the seemingly endless debates that were preoccupying the empiricists and idealists [and]... the materialists and spiritualists.”<sup>18</sup> For his “mass of descriptive details,” James enlisted, for example, materialist methods and the insights provided by belief in a soul, but, Leary adds, “to make any claims about the ultimate nature of mental states would be going beyond what could be said ‘positively.’”<sup>19</sup> This identification of positivism in James places him in the company of those who showed more enthusiasm for science than he could muster.

James’s position seems closer to naturalism, or experiential empiricism, in that he reckoned so carefully with natural facts as experienced, what he called “the point of view of natural science,” without the filtering effects of theories, even scientific theory.<sup>20</sup> Yet he respected investigations motivated by a range of theories, so he readily and pragmatically enlisted the insights of researchers uncovering new features of human mind and behavior. To James,

“theories [served as] instruments, not answers to enigmas,” and in writing about the science of psychology, he used the mental tools of scientists with positivist and materialist inclinations without adopting their views, just as he tapped idealistic and religious ideas with a posture of “more deference than ... adoption.”<sup>21</sup>

Some of the pairs in Leary’s chapter organization are not necessarily contrasts. In “Habit and Thought,” Leary identifies the “neurological foundation of habit-formation”; habits begin with mental choices before bodily reinforcement, and then over time they effectively become bodily thoughts.<sup>22</sup> This routinization of thought and mental choices gives habits more “plasticity” than reflexes or instincts, which operate on physiological paths; habits build on those, in “reinforcement of some of these established paths.”<sup>23</sup> In sum, habit is not in contrast with thought but a routinized form of thinking, distinct from more spontaneous thought whose deliberate choices enlist reason in the weighing of options. Turning away from the elegant concision of all Leary’s chapter titles, it is tempting to suggest that this chapter could be called “Routinized and Spontaneous Thought” or “Instinct, Habit, and Thought,” with James “rejecting any sharp separation” among these, while attending to the bodily and mental agency within each, in differing degrees.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Leary also points out that “despite the distinctions he made at times between thought and feeling, or cognition and emotion, James never intended to suggest a sharp division between them.”<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, he saw these processes, as Leary recognizes, “always acting together to shape the contours and consequences of our experience.”<sup>26</sup>

The biographical correlate of the scholarly debate about James’s theoretical inconsistencies is a question about the continuity of his thought. Did he turn toward dualism when producing *The Principles* and then turn away from this orientation in the philosophy of his last years, or was he consistently nondualist throughout his career, with less opposition to dualism than embrace of it as an intellectual tool useful for some purposes, such as with scientific psychology research?<sup>27</sup>

Leary's magnanimous approach to diverse interpretations is well suited to the pedagogical purposes of a guidebook, but the presentation leads to some consistency issues of its own. For example, Leary suggests that James's first positivist story about mind and body placed his other more "interactionist" stories "on treacherous metaphysical grounds."<sup>28</sup> This underplays not only the creative metaphysical grounds within the psychology text but also Leary's own accounts about this creativity, based on what Leary calls James's "obvious ... inclination ... toward interaction."<sup>29</sup> In fact, Leary sometimes comes close to endorsing the narrative of James's consistent non-dualism, in describing his "consistent trajectory ... toward complete unification" of mind and body.<sup>30</sup> To explain that trajectory, Leary turns not to qualification of the first story but to James's "'complete, unqualified reliance upon *experience*, pure, simple, and all of one piece."<sup>31</sup> That non-dual "one piece" is indeed a central plank of radical empiricism, as Leary readily and astutely explains.

Leary's thoughtful commentary on James's approach to religion actually suggests a way to resolve the apparent inconsistencies of the three stories. Leary reports that James, in his evaluation of religious experience, "was able to put himself into 'the sectarian scientist's attitude,' but whenever he did so, he heard his 'inward monitor...whispering...'bosh!'"<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in James's inquiries about the relation of mind and body, James was also able to put himself into the "scientist's attitude," with an openness to what their research could provide, so even the positivist perspective was useful, but not the last word, or as Leary argues, this perspective for James was "a methodological premise to be used for 'scientific purposes.'"<sup>33</sup> Leary also points out that for James, "a 'strictly positivistic' psychology... would be 'provisional' until it was eventually incorporated, along with the other natural sciences, into an overarching 'Science of all things,' which would be the future 'metaphysics'" of his hopes.<sup>34</sup> This approach to science resembles both the pre-modern definition of science as broad learning and James's own 1864 "Program of the Future Science."<sup>35</sup> Leary's interpretations of James's psychology in relation to his evolving

philosophy supports the view that James's attention to dualist ideas in *The Principles* was less about philosophical commitment than about endorsement of pragmatic and rhetorical ways to incorporate recent scientific research into his evolving views of psychology.<sup>36</sup>

The structure of Leary's book is sometimes in tension with his own interpretations. In doing so, he really stays true to his task. This guidebook to James's text is fair to different ways of reading James, even as Leary steadily reveals his own points of view. With this approach to writing about *The Principles*, Leary actually replicates James's own path in writing to summarize and honor the new scientific psychology while punctuating his account with his own views on the complexities of human psychology. Leary's grasp of James and his kinship with his approaches to human psychology run deep.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> William James to Henry Holt, *Correspondence*, vol. 7 (May 9, 1890): 23-24.
- <sup>2</sup> For examples of James's anticipation of later research, see Leary's coverage, 77, 303-04, and 317-31.
- <sup>3</sup> Leary, 311.
- <sup>4</sup> William James to Alice Howe Gibbens, *Correspondence*, vol. 4 (June 7, [18]77): 571; Croce, *Young William James Thinking*, 26.
- <sup>5</sup> For example, see James, "The Ph.D. Octopus," in *Essays*: 67-74.
- <sup>6</sup> Steffens, *Autobiography*, 149-50.
- <sup>7</sup> Witmer, "National Peril," 436-38.
- <sup>8</sup> See Gale; and also see Taylor, 59. On the history of James's reputation, see Croce, "Reaching Beyond Uncle William," 351-77.
- <sup>9</sup> James, "Historical Collation, 'The Dilemma of Determinism,'" in *Will to Believe*, 383.
- <sup>10</sup> Leary, 28.
- <sup>11</sup> Leary, 311, 287, and 260 (and 261 and 265).



<sup>12</sup> Leary, 53.

<sup>13</sup> Leary, 53.

<sup>14</sup> Leary, 54.

<sup>15</sup> Leary, 54.

<sup>16</sup> Leary, 54-55.

<sup>17</sup> Leary, 308.

<sup>18</sup> Leary, 39.

<sup>19</sup> Leary, 39.

<sup>20</sup> James, *Principles*, vol. 1, 6.

<sup>21</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 32, and James to Alice Howe Gibbens, *Correspondence*, vol. 4 (October 9, 1876), 547.

<sup>22</sup> Leary, 79.

<sup>23</sup> Leary, 78.

<sup>24</sup> Leary, 78.

<sup>25</sup> Leary, 147.

<sup>26</sup> Leary, 147.

<sup>27</sup> I pursue the question of continuity in *Young William James Thinking*, 265-66. Leary maintains that James by 1890 “did not yet have a ... way of thinking ... that allowed him to deal adequately with the intimate connection between ... mind and body” (312), and Leary finds evidence for James’s discontinuity in parts of *The Principles* that are “not as thoroughly radical as in other areas,” for example, in his argument that each conception “is not subject to modification” (324). Leary argues that this seems in sharp contrast with his later theories. However, in *The Principles*, James defines conceptions as “something which our attention ... tore out of the continuum of felt experience”; that is what he calls an (artificially) static conception, and in fact, changes in attention could and generally do also focus on “other parts of the continuum from which it was torn.” James does maintain that each initial conception does not change, but if “two of them are thought ... [in] relation,” a “third conception” may emerge—and this shows change, albeit not a change in the originally selected portion of experience which formed the first conception. Also, even within this section, “Conceptions are Unchangeable,” James readily observes interactions of elements of mind and body: “new conceptions come from new sensation, new movements, [and] new emotions,” as well as from “new acts of attention” (James, *Principles*, 439-42).

<sup>28</sup> Leary, 54.

<sup>29</sup> Leary, 66.

<sup>30</sup> Leary, 70.

<sup>31</sup> Leary, 71.

<sup>32</sup> Leary, 274; James, *Varieties*, 408.

<sup>33</sup> Leary, 307.

<sup>34</sup> Leary, 306-07; James, *Briefer Course*, 395 and 399; James, *Principles*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> James to Charles Eliot Norton, *Correspondence* 4 (Nov[ember] 14, [1864]): 93-94; and Croce, *Young William James Thinking*, 68, 71-72, 93, 173, 239, and 271-72.

<sup>36</sup> John O'Donnell adds the support of social history to this view: James's use of dualist thinking in mid-career was "professionally expedient" (O'Donnell, *Origins of Behaviorism*, 92).