Early American Psychology: The Roots of Modern Thought

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Around 1875, the Harvard physiology instructor (as he then was), William James, opened a small experimental psychology demonstration laboratory for use with his courses. The laboratory was never used, in those days, for original research, and so controversy remains as to whether it is to be regarded as the "first" experimental psychology laboratory or not. In 1878, James gave a series of lectures at Johns Hopkins University entitled "The Senses and the Brain and their Relation to Thought" in which he argued, contra Thomas Henry Huxley, that consciousness is not epiphenomenal, but must have an evolutionary function, or it would not have been naturally selected in humans. The same year James was contracted by Henry Holt to write a textbook on the "new" experimental psychology. If he had written it quickly, it would have been the first English-language textbook on the topic. It was twelve years, however, before his two-volume Principles of Psychology would be published. In the meantime textbooks were published by George Trumbull Ladd of Yale (1887) and James Mark Baldwin then of Lake Forest College (1889).

In 1879 Charles Sanders Peirce was hired as a philosophy instructor at Johns Hopkins University. Although better known for his astronomical and philosophical work, Peirce also conducted what are perhaps the first American psychology experiments, on the subject of color vision, published in 1877 in the American Journal of Science (see Cadwallader, 1974). Peirce and his student Joseph Jastrow published "On Small Differences in Sensation" in the Memoirs of the National Academy of Sciences, in 1884. In 1882, Peirce was joined at Johns Hopkins by G. Stanley Hall, who opened the first American research laboratory devoted to experimental psychology in 1883. Peirce was forced out of his position by scandal and Hall was awarded the only professorship in philosophy at Johns Hopkins. In 1887 Hall founded the American Journal of Psychology, which published work primarily emanating from his own laboratory. In 1888 Hall left his Johns Hopkins professorship for the presidency of the newly founded Clark University, where he remained for the rest of his career.

Soon, experimental psychology laboratories were opened at the University of Pennsylvania (in 1887, by James McKeen Cattell), Indiana University (1888, William Lowe Bryan), the University of Wisconsin (1888, Joseph Jastrow), Clark University (1889, Edmund Sanford), the McLean Asylum (1889, William Noyes), and the University of Nebraska (1889, Harry Kirke Wolfe). However, it was Princeton University's Eno Hall, built in 1924, that became the first university building in the United States to be devoted entirely to experimental psychology when it became the home of the university's Department of Psychology.

In 1890, William James' Principles of Psychology finally appeared, and rapidly became the most influential textbook in the history of American psychology. It laid many of the foundations for the sorts of questions that American psychologists would focus on for years to come. The book's chapters on consciousness, emotion, and habit were particularly agenda-setting.

One of those who felt the impact of James' Principles was John Dewey, then professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan. With his junior colleagues, James Hayden Tufts (who

founded the psychology laboratory at Michigan) and George Herbert Mead, and his student James Rowland Angell, this group began to reformulate psychology, focusing more strongly on the social environment and on the activity of mind and behavior than the psychophysics-inspired physiological psychology of Wundt and his followers had heretofore. Tufts left Michigan for another junior position at the newly founded University of Chicago in 1892. A year later, the senior philosopher at Chicago resigned, and Tufts recommended to Chicago president William Rainey Harper that Dewey be offered the position. After initial reluctance, Dewey was hired in 1894. Dewey soon filled out the department with his Michigan companions Mead and Angell. These four formed the core of the Chicago School of psychology.

In 1892, G. Stanley Hall invited 30-some psychologists and philosophers to a meeting at Clark with the purpose of founding a new American Psychological Association (APA). (On the history of the APA, see Evans, Staudt Sexton, & Cadwallader, 1992.) The first annual meeting of the APA was held later that year, hosted by George Stuart Fullerton at the University of Pennsylvania. Almost immediately tension arose between the experimentally and philosophically inclined members of the APA. Edward Bradford Titchener and Lightner Witmer launched an attempt to either establish a separate "Section" for philosophical presentations, or to eject the philosophers altogether. After nearly a decade of debate a Western Philosophical Association was founded and held its first meeting in 1901 at the University of Nebraska. The following year (1902), an American Philosophical Association held its first meeting at Columbia University. These ultimately became the Central and Eastern Divisions of the modern American Philosophical Association.

In 1894, a number of psychologists, unhappy with the parochial editorial policies of the American Journal of Psychology approached Hall about appointing an editorial board and opening the journal out to more psychologists not within Hall's immediate circle. Hall refused, so James McKeen Cattell (then of Columbia) and James Mark Baldwin (then of Princeton) co-founded a new journal, Psychological Review, which rapidly grew to become a major outlet for American psychological researchers.

Beginning in 1895, James Mark Baldwin and Edward Bradford Titchener (Cornell) entered into an increasingly acrimonious dispute over the correct interpretation of some anomalous reaction time findings that had come from the Wundt laboratory (originally reported by Ludwig Lange and James McKeen Cattell). In 1896, James Rowland Angell and Addison W. Moore (Chicago) published a series of experiments in Psychological Review appearing to show that Baldwin was the more correct of the two. However, they interpreted their findings in light of John Dewey's new approach to psychology, which rejected the traditional stimulus-response understanding of the reflex arc in favor of a "circular" account in which what serves as "stimulus" and what as "response" depends on how one views the situation. The full position was laid out in Dewey's landmark article "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" which also appeared in Psychological Review in 1896.

Titchener responded in Philosophical Review (1898, 1899) by distinguishing his austere "structural" approach to psychology from what he termed the Chicago group's more applied "functional" approach, and thus began the first major theoretical rift in American psychology between Structuralism and Functionalism. The group at Columbia, led by James McKeen Cattell, Edward L. Thorndike, and Robert S. Woodworth, was often regarded as a second (after Chicago) "school" of American Functionalism (see, e.g., Heidbredder, 1933), although they never used that term themselves, because their research focused on the applied areas of mental testing, learning, and education. Dewey was elected president of the APA in 1899, while Titchener dropped his membership in the association. (In 1904, Titchener formed his own group, eventually known as the Society of Experimental Psychologists.) Jastrow promoted the functionalist approach in his APA presidential address of 1900, and Angell adopted Titchener's label explicitly in his influential textbook of 1904 and his APA presidential address of 1906. In reality, Structuralism was, more or less, confined to Titchener and his students. Functionalism, broadly speaking, with its more practical emphasis on action and application, better suited the American cultural "style" and, perhaps more important, was more popular among university trustees and private funding agencies.