

Functionalism: Why Your Mind Adapts to Survive

Authored by
mohammad looti

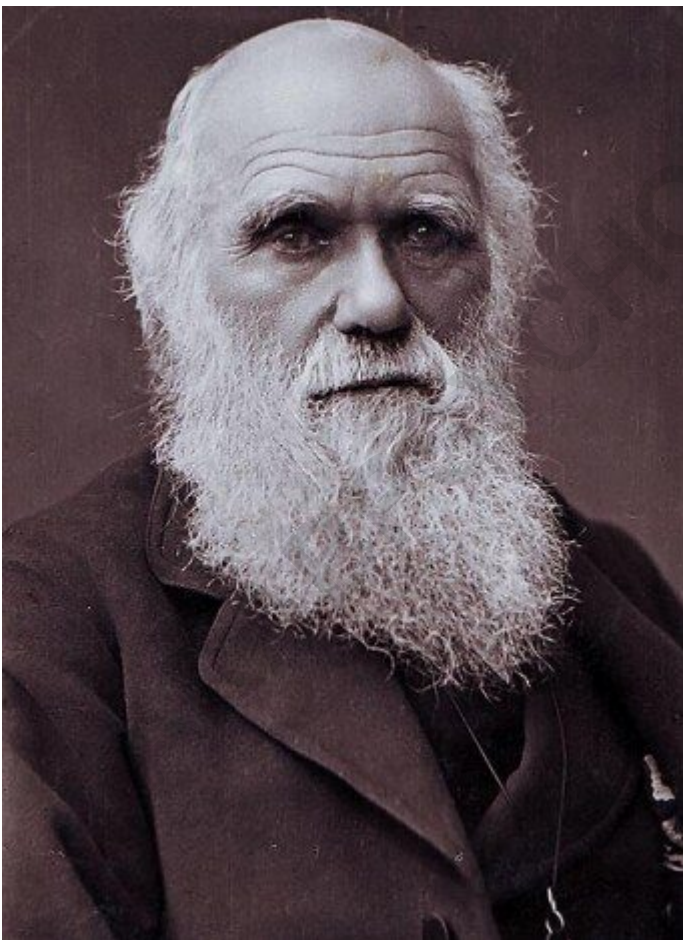
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In psychology, a broad school of thought originating in the U.S. during the late 19th century that attempted to counter the German school of structuralism led by Edward B. Titchener. Functionalists, including psychologists William James and James Rowland Angell, and philosophers George H. Mead, Archibald L. Moore, and John Dewey, stressed the importance of empirical, rational thought over an experimental, trial-and-error philosophy. The group was concerned more with the capability of the mind than with the process of thought. The movement was thus interested primarily in the practical applications of research, which focused on how consciousness functions to help human beings adapt to their environment.

The goal of the first psychologists was to determine the structure of consciousness just as chemists had found the structure of chemicals. Thus, the school of psychology associated with this approach earned the name structuralism. This perspective began in Germany in the laboratory of Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920).



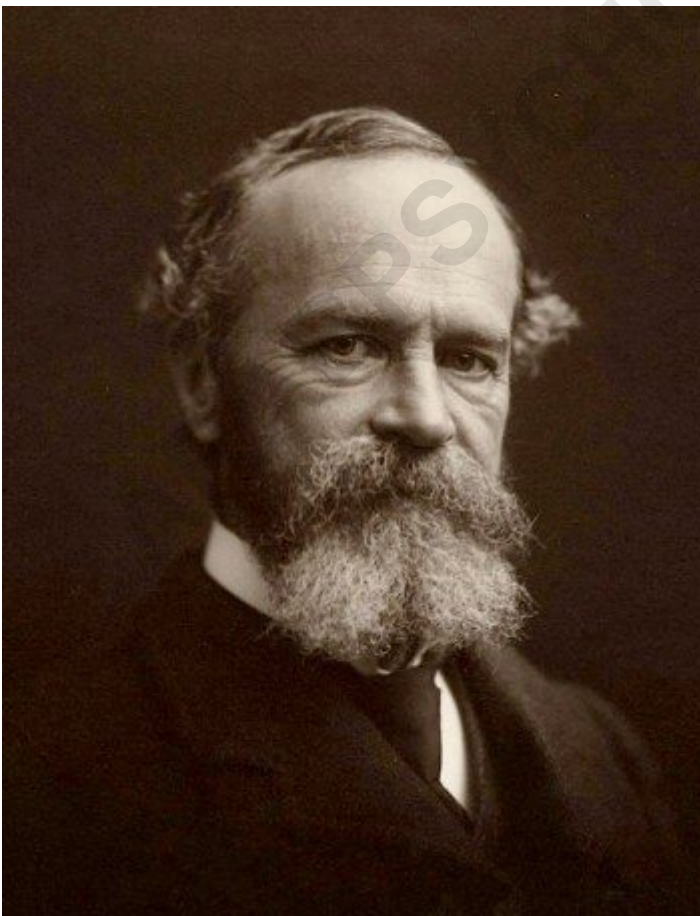
Charles Darwin

Before long, however, psychologists suggested that psychology should not concern itself with the structure of consciousness because, they argued, consciousness was always changing so it had

no basic structure. Instead, they suggested that psychology should focus on the function or purpose of consciousness and how it leads to adaptive behavior. This approach to psychology was consistent with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, which exerted a significant impact on the character of psychology. The school of functionalism developed and flourished in the United States, which quickly surpassed Germany as the primary location of scientific psychology.

In 1892, George Trumbull Ladd (1842-1921), one of the early presidents of the American Psychological Association, had declared that objective psychology should not replace the subjective psychology of the structuralists. By 1900, however, most psychologists agreed with a later president, Joseph Jastrow, that psychology was the science of mental content, not of structure. At that point, structuralism still had some adherents, but it was fast becoming a minor part of psychology.

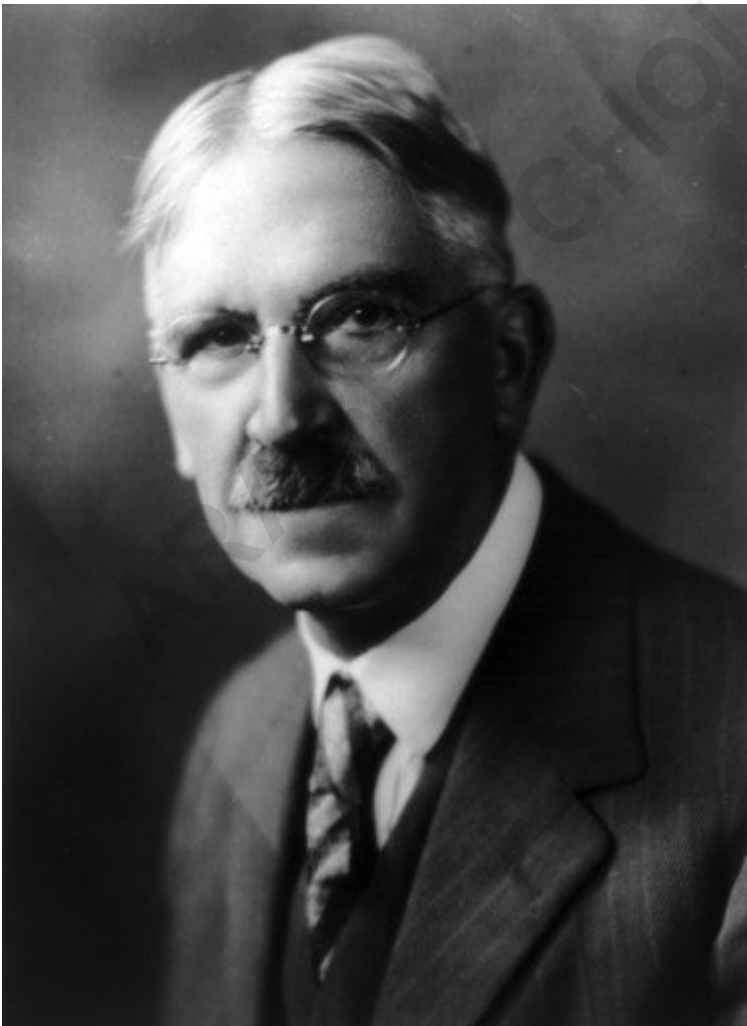
The early functionalists included the pre-eminent psychologist and philosopher William James. James promoted the idea that the mind and consciousness itself would not exist if it did not serve some practical, adaptive purpose. It had evolved because it presented advantages. Along with this idea, James maintained that psychology should be practical and should be developed to make a difference in people's lives.



William James

One of the difficulties that concerned the functionalists was how to reconcile the objective, scientific nature of psychology with its focus on consciousness, which by its nature is not directly observable. Although psychologists like William James accepted the reality of consciousness and the role of the will in people's lives, even he was unable to resolve the issue of scientific acceptance of consciousness and will within functionalism.

Other functionalists, like John Dewey, developed ideas that moved ever farther from the realm that structuralism had created. Dewey, for example, used James's ideas as the basis for his writings, but asserted that consciousness and the will were not relevant concepts for scientific psychology. Instead, the behavior is the critical issue and should be considered in the context in which it occurs. For example, a stimulus might be important in one circumstance, but irrelevant in another. A person's response to that stimulus depends on the value of that stimulus in the current situation. Thus, practical and adaptive responses characterize behavior, not some unseen force like consciousness.



John Dewey

This dilemma of how to deal with a phenomenon as subjective as consciousness within the context of an objective psychology ultimately led to the abandonment of functionalism in favor of behaviorism, which rejected everything dealing with consciousness. By 1912, very few psychologists regarded psychology as the study of mental content--the focus was on behavior instead. As it turned out, the school of functionalism provided a temporary framework for the replacement of structuralism, but was itself supplanted by the school of behaviorism.

Criticism

Interestingly, functionalism drew criticism from both the structuralists and from the behaviorists. The structuralists accused the functionalists of failing to define the concepts that were important to functionalism. Further, the structuralists declared that the functionalists were simply not studying psychology at all; psychology to a structuralist involved mental content and nothing else. Finally, the functionalists drew criticism for applying psychology; the structuralists opposed applications in the name of psychology.

On the other hand, behaviorists were uncomfortable with the functionalists' acceptance of consciousness and sought to make psychology the study of behavior. Eventually, the behavioral approach gained ascendance and reigned for the next half century.

Conclusion

Functionalism was important in the development of psychology because it broadened the scope of psychological research and application. Because of the wider perspective, psychologists accepted the validity of research with animals, with children, and with people having psychiatric disabilities. Further, functionalists introduced a wide variety of research techniques that were beyond the boundaries of structural psychology, like physiological measures, mental tests, and questionnaires. The functionalist legacy endures in psychology today. Some historians have suggested that functional psychology was consistent with the progressivism that characterized American psychology at the end of the nineteenth century: more people were moving to and living in urban areas, science seemed to hold all the answers for creating a Utopian society, educational reform was underway, and many societal changes faced America. It is not surprising that psychologists began to consider the role that psychology could play in developing a better society.