

Functionalism

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FUNCTIONALISM


- ▶ Various schools of thoughts have emerged in psychology in the last two to three hundred years. These schools differed from one another on the basis of what they reckoned as the subject matter of psychology and how they explained it. One of the early major schools in the development of psychology is the functionalist school. Like the Structuralism school, Functionalists also defined psychology as the study of consciousness but instead of explaining the structure of consciousness and describing its content, Functionalists focused on, as the name implies, the functioning of consciousness. There are two branches of functionalists:
 - ▶ American functionalists; those who were on the American continent.
 - ▶ European functionalists; those who were on the European continent.


American Functionalists


- ▶ American functionalists are philosophers/psychologists who practiced on the American continent and considered psychology as the study of consciousness, focusing on functions of consciousness.

William James

- ▶ William James was born in 1842 and he died in 1910. He was an American philosopher, brother of the novelist Henry James. In 1872 he joined the Harvard faculty as lecturer of anatomy and physiology, after 1880 worked in the department of psychology and philosophy, continued teaching until 1907. In 1890 he published his brilliant and epoch-making book *Principles of Psychology*, in which the seeds of his philosophy are already discernible. James's fascinating style and his broad culture and cosmopolitan outlook made him the most influential American thinker of his era. James is considered the founder of the sort of thinking called functionalism. The basic question that was raised by James when he purported his theory was that —what is the purpose of consciousness? Therefore unlike the Structuralisms who emphasized on explaining the structure and the parts of consciousness, James came up with a completely new point of view. He focused on why we need consciousness. This need is the function that the consciousness performs, therefore his theories focused on explanation of the functions of consciousness and he is known as the founder of functionalist school.

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- ▶ William James put forward the view that consciousness is not epiphenomena, means that consciousness cannot be considered as something whose functions or working cannot be explained. Consciousness has to have certain set patterns of functions and it shall always work according to those patterns. Therefore, if we consider consciousness to be an —epiphenomena it would be wrong. Consciousness needs to be studied and understood in order to explain its functions. Explaining the function of consciousness, James put forward the view that consciousness creates adjustment between the organism and the environment. This means that the organism needs to adjust and adapt its environment in order to survive. This adaptation process is carried out with the help of consciousness. Consciousness helps the organism to understand the environment and cope with the changes in it.


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- ▶ James was also of the view that not just consciousness but all human psychological functions have a definite purpose. For example, fear in an animal creates movement in the body; laughter reduces tension etc. Therefore, the importance of all these psychological functions as well as consciousness is due to their functions. If these functions are disturbed, the organism cannot survive. Therefore, instead of focusing on the structure of the consciousness, scientists should focus on the functions.
 - ▶ His view was based upon his philosophy of pragmatism which means that the validity of an idea is tested by its consequences. In other words, when we need to assay how valid an idea is we need to look at the consequences of the application of idea. If the consequences are as expected, the idea is correct, if not, the idea is wrong. Adopting a pragmatic approach, James was able to give the idea of the functions of consciousness being more important.

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- ▶ William James is also known for his theory of emotions, now called James-Lange theory of emotions. According to this theory, emotions are the consequences of perceptions of bodily changes. For example, a person feels angry because he strikes something. The perception that is generated by this event results in generation of certain responses which are emotions. In this case the emotion would be anger.
 - ▶ He also emphasized that repetition is most important for learning and it creates habits. Therefore, we can develop habits by repeating certain acts. In other words, if we want to develop a habit of something, we need to perform the thing again and again or repeatedly. Ultimately it would become a habit. These were some of the contributions of William James.



- ▶ **John Dewey**

- ▶ The other prominent American functionalist was a philosopher, psychologist and above all an educationist, John Dewey, born in 1859 and died in 1952. He taught at the universities of Minnesota, Michigan and Chicago and at Columbia from 1904 until his retirement in 1930. Since John Dewey was an educationist, his theories focused on the field of education. Dewey put forward the view that education, particularly of children, should be based upon the needs of the children. This means that children of different ages have different needs.

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- ▶ The education system should concentrate on understanding those needs and should adjust itself to meet the needs. In other words, while forming an education system, the needs have to be focused upon. For further understanding, children have different educational needs during his or her developmental stages. These needs need to be focused upon. This was one of the greatest contributions of John Dewey. His point of view had a great impact on educational practices in the States and globally.

EUROPEAN FUNCTIONALISTS

- ▶ **David Katz**

- ▶ The first of the European functionalists was David Katz. He taught psychology at Stockholm, Sweden, for a number of years. In order to develop theory of functions of consciousness, Katz experimented upon how we see colors. He showed through his experiments that the perception of colors remains constant in different lights. This means that if someone is asked about a color in one kind of light, his or her answer would be the same in another kind of light. But in reality, colors change because of different lights. David Katz showed that human subjects see them as before. This he called the —phenomenon of color constancy. Katz purported that color constancy is a function of the consciousness which makes the person perceive a color in the same way as before. Therefore, Katz also focused on explaining the functions of consciousness and hence included in the functionalist school of thought.




▶ **Edgar Rubin**


- ▶ The other European functionalist was Edgar Rubin who taught at Copenhagen, Holland. Rubin showed by his experiments on perception, that human beings see shapes in terms of figure and ground. This is not just limited to the sense of vision but also on other senses. For example, in case of the sense of vision, sky is the ground and clouds are the figures. When we look at the clouds, we acknowledge their existence because they exist in a background of the blue sky. Further, when we look at a tree, the sky again serves as the background while the tree is the figure in the background. In case of other senses, the sense of hearing also depicts this phenomenon. When we listen to a song, the music being played is the ground and voice of the singer is the figure. Therefore, Edgar Rubin also focused on how the consciousness functions rather than the structure of the consciousness.




▶ **Jean Piaget**

- ▶ The third European functionalist was Jean Piaget who worked at Geneva and Zurich, Switzerland. Piaget is famous for his theory of how children's minds develop. He postulated the concept of Schemata. According to him, Schemata is a construct or an idea in the mind of children that how the world is, and how the world functions. In other words, it is what the children perceive about the world around them. They think about how everything occurs, how things go about and how they function. Of all this they make up explanations which according to Piaget is a Schemata.

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- ▶ Schemata develop over the time by two processes:
 - ▶ **Assimilation**
 - ▶ **Accommodation**
 - ▶ Here, assimilation is the absorption of new and different information about the world and accommodation according to Piaget is the expanding, stretching and changing of schemata to absorb new information about the world. This means that when a child is exposed to various happening of the world he absorbs information from the happenings.

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- ▶ This information, collection or absorption process is called assimilation. On the other hand, the information is a subject to constant change. As the child grows, he is exposed to more and more information which requires constant refurbishing of the previously gathered information. This process is called accommodation.

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- ▶ Another contribution of Jean Piaget is that he elaborated how children develop. According to him development takes place in four stages:
 - ▶ **The sensory-motor stage**
 - ▶ This is the first stage of development when children learn using their sensations. For example a child touches a hot object and is hurt, this would create awareness in his or her mind that touching hot objects is harmful. Therefore, the child learns by using the sensations. Further all sensations like hot, cold, rough, smooth shall result in learning.



- ▶ **The pre-operational stage**

- ▶ This is the second stage when the child for the first time, discovers rules and principles of how things work. In other words, the child has the primary or initial information about the working of the things that he sees around him. It is above from learning just through senses.


- ▶ **The concrete operational stage**

- ▶ This is the third stage when his reason and logic develops and he learns by reasoning. This stage combines the information gathered from the previous two stages and the child is able to develop his own explanation of the things.



- ▶ **The formal operational stage**

- ▶ This is the most developed and the last stage of development where the child is able to learn by abstraction. In other words, the child is able to draw conclusions about working of things, and phenomena using his own ability to associate ideas, perceive, think, and explain the happenings.

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- ▶ Jean Piaget therefore studied psychological functions in terms of learning and in terms of development. This means that he focused on how learning and development takes place. In other words, he also focused on the functions rather than structure of psychological phenomena. He is therefore included in the functionalist school as a European functionalist.