**Foundational Thought**

The Greeks

Pre-Socratic philosophers began to investigate psychological questions. However, it was with **Socrates** that ideas emerged that shaped how we could answer these questions. Socrates held that all our knowledge is innate, we already know what we will know, and this knowledge resides in an immortal soul. This conception of knowledge and immortal soul set up the mind-body split, or dualism, which has plagued and aggravated Western thinkers (at least since Descartes).

Socrates had a faithful student, **Plato**, who maintained Socrates' dualism and downplayed the importance of our sensory perception in gaining knowledge about the world around us, an idea that would benefit Christianity and significantly delay the development of an empirically-based psychology.

But then, in a turnaround, **Aristotle**, a pupil of Plato, eventually supported the value of experience for gaining knowledge, while dealing with many of psychology's contemporary questions in a contemporary way, though sometimes mixed with errors and folklore. (A story goes that Aristotle thought that women had fewer teeth than men.)

The Christian Thinkers

For close to 2000 years—20 centuries—there was little development in psychology. The Church's insistence on knowledge through faith (and the existence of an immortal soul housed in a mortal body) stymied empirical investigation of the world. There were some figures who thought profoundly:

* **Saint Augustine**, who believed that thought could transcend sensory experience (echoing Plato).
* **Saint Thomas Aquinas**, who attempted to adapt Aristotle's thought to Christianity. In doing this, he gave some validity to sense perception (an advantage to an empirical psychology) but also held that we attain certain higher ideas only through faith (harmful to an empirical psychology).

The Rationalists and Other New Groups

But, progress can be repressed for only so long. In the 1600s there began a mode of investigation we would eventually call science, a mode vigorously but unsuccessfully opposed by Platonists and the Church. The challenge came in two forms:

* There were the rationalists, mostly at this time in France and Germany. Rationalists held that rationality—thought (not faith)—is more important than sense experience. A major philosopher of this persuasion was **Descartes**, who said the famous phrase "I think, therefore I am," in response to the question of how we know we exist. Descartes also maintained the mind-body dualism of Socrates.
* Meanwhile, across the Channel, British philosophers were forming a quite different system. **John Locke** maintained that the contents of our minds have been planted there by our experiences with our common world, and there are no innate ideas.
* Other British philosophers were working out how these elementary sense perceptions could be combined to form our complex ideas. **David Hume** wrote on this but also explored the concept of causality, an exploration that led directly to the thought of our next—and last, for this unit—philosopher. (You are encouraged to investigate Hume's ideas about why we can never know for sure what causes what.)

Back on the Continent, especially in Germany, a movement we shall call the nativists was forming. An offshoot of the rationalist camp, they advocated not for innate ideas but that the mind came with structures—ways of interpreting our sense experience—already built in (remember this when you come to Piaget and Chomsky). Hume's attack on causality caused the greatest philosopher of that period, **Kant**, to justify the belief that some events do cause other events because of these innate structures of our minds.

The 1700s to 1900s

Two men, **Franz Anton Mesmer** and **Franz Joseph Gall**, made magnificent errors that benefited psychology. Each developed a theory that was completely wrong and soon discredited, but the practice of these ideas led others to topics that became central to psychological practice and research. Notice that something wrong had unintended and far-reaching consequences.

Three men other men— **Ernst Heinrich Weber**, **Hermann von Helmholtz**, and **Gustav Theodor Fechner**—considered their work part of physiology, but the results of their research provided the foundation of scientific psychology. They showed precise and predictable relationships between external stimuli (for example, objects of different weights) and mental processes (how much difference in weight must there be for a person to notice the difference?).

Why was this important? The great philosopher, Kant, said that mental processes were not part of the physical world and could not be investigated by empirical science. While many people took this for fact, the physiologists had unintentionally proven Kant wrong. We could indeed measure mental processes and put those measurements into mathematical formulae. Scientific psychology was thus able to emerge.

Psychology was announced as a separate discipline in 1875, when both **Wilhelm Wundt** (in Germany) and **William James** set up psychological laboratories. However, historians have bestowed the title First Psychologist on Wundt, because he was the first, in 1879, to conduct a study that could be called an experiment (see the section on science in the general introduction to this course). Thus, in 1879, in Leipzig, Germany, scientific psychology, or psychology as a separate discipline, arrived.

William James was in many ways the quintessential American philosopher and psychologist. He and **Charles Peirce**, another American philosopher, created the philosophical school of pragmatism, a distinctly American philosophy. (One example of pragmatic thought is that an idea is worth only what we can do with it.) Bringing this same outlook to psychology, James began the psychological school of functionalism, which considers that behavior, consciousness, and all the psychological phenomena have the function or purpose of advancing our survival (In this we see Charles Darwin's influence.). Since James did not like to do empirical research, he soon turned over his laboratory to another psychologist you will learn about in this assessment.

James also contributed to thought of a mind-body split, that philosophical heritage from Plato and Christianity that had impeded a scientific approach to studying mental phenomena. James laid it aside while acknowledging its importance. He held that, for psychology to develop, it had to ignore this problem. This allowed psychology to progress in new ways. However, the mind-body split conception has never disappeared. It can be seen in modern colloquialisms such as "mind over matter" (the idea that there are mental problems that are distinct from physical ones), the phrase "it's all in your mind" (meaning something has no legitimate existence), and so on.