

# The development of psychology as a scientific discipline philosophy essay



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One of the most notable figure in the development of psychology as a scientific discipline is René Descartes, a French philosopher and mathematician. Descartes was most recognized as a proponent of dualism which supported the idea that all reality can be divided into two vivid and distinct entities: mind and matter. Descartes distinguished himself from other philosophers in that he proposed an existing link or interaction between mind and matter called interactionism. This was the key development in psychology as a scientific discipline because it led to two key principles in psychology – introspectionism and behaviourism.

Despite Descartes' emphasis on the rationalism which is the pursuit of truth through the process of reasoning, John Locke, the British first empiricist, suggested that empiricism which involves the pursuit of truth through observation and experience is the preferred method of investigation. Being the pioneer to define self through a continuity of consciousness, Locke postulated that the mind was a blank slate of tabula rasa. Contrary to Descartes' cartesian philosophy, he believed that we were born without innate idea and that the knowledge is instead measured only by experience derived from various sense perceptions. Yet, some of the information attained from our senses is subjective and non-trustworthy while some are objective and trustworthy. He put great emphasis upon the belief that our knowledge of complex experiences were made up from the links between simple and primary sensations.

This idea was further developed by David Hume, a Scottish philosopher, known especially for his philosophical empiricism and scepticism. Yet, there was a slight difference from Locke's argument. While Locke wrote of innate

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ideas, Hume introduced the concept of perceptions which consisted of impressions and ideas and strove to develop a total naturalistic “ science of man” that examined the human nature on a psychological basis. To Hume, impressions were the most important perceptions because they were derived directly from observations. He strongly believed that only empirically derived content are valuable and trustworthy. Thus, he developed positivism – the philosophy of science rooted on the view that data derived from sensory experience and that logical and mathematical analysis of such data produce all authoritative knowledge.

In contrast to the empiricists, George Berkely, an Anglo-Irish philosopher proposed that our knowledge comes from the inferences derived from experience through our senses instead of simply coming from direct experiences. His notable achievement of the advancement of the theory called “ immaterialism” or “ subjective idealism” which denies the existence of material substance. In contrast, this theory contends that objects are only ideas in the perceivers’ minds hence cannot exist without being perceived.

A Scottish philosopher, James Mill then further developed on the idea and moved the focus from animism to materialism which is a belief that truth can be founded only after a thorough understanding of our physical world. The assumption that Mill insisted was that humans and animals were basically the same that both were entirely physical in their outer look and were totally subjected to the physical laws of the universe. Though agreed in essence with Descartes’ primary approach in understanding the human body, Mill was against the concept of an immaterial mind.

Later on in the mid-1800s, a German physiologist, Wilhelm Wundt, used scientific research methods to investigate reaction times and his book, *Principles of Physiological Psychology* illustrated many of the main connections between the science of physiology and the study of humans' thought and behaviour. The opening of the world's first psychology lab at the University of Leipzig in 1879 marked the official beginning of psychology as a distinct scientific discipline. Wundt maintained that psychology is a study of humans' consciousness and intended to apply as many experimental methods as possible to investigating and understanding internal mental processes. Though his use of "introspection" is seen as a non-trustable and non-scientific method today, his early work during the days helped to kick-start a stage for future experimental methods and hence was significant in the development of psychology as a scientific discipline.

One of the Wundt's most famous student, Edward B. Titchener went on to develop and found psychology's first major school of thought and proposed the idea that human consciousness can be broken down into smaller parts via introspection. He was one of the most prominent structuralist. While structuralism was notable for its emphasis on science research, its methods were less convincing, unreliable, limiting and subjective. The concept essentially died when Titchener passed away in 1927.

In response to structuralism, functionalism, an American perspective which was largely influenced by the work of William James and the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin emerged. Functionalists sought for explanation for the mental processes in much systematic and accurate way. Instead of focussing on the elements of consciousness, they focussed on its purpose.

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This brings psychology a step closer to scientific discipline by placing great emphasis on systematic research method.

In early 20th Century, another major school of thought known as behaviourism rose to dominance. It was a significant change from the past theoretical views. In fact, it was aimed to transform psychology into a much scientific discipline by solely emphasising on observable behaviour. It was started by Ivan Pavlov and two of the strongest advocates were John B. Watson and B. F. Skinner. However, behaviourism does not encourage scientific psychology.

Among all, the concept of empiricism developed by philosophers John Locke and David Hume was the most significant leap in the development of psychology as a scientific discipline.