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PSYCHOLOGY

A Very Short Introduction

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It is also a pleasure to acknowledge the high quality of the work done by the editorial team at Oxford University Press in the process of producing this new edition. Any remaining errors are ours. Our main wish is to convey an interest and enthusiasm for this subject that is not only ours but is shared by those who have helped us along the way.

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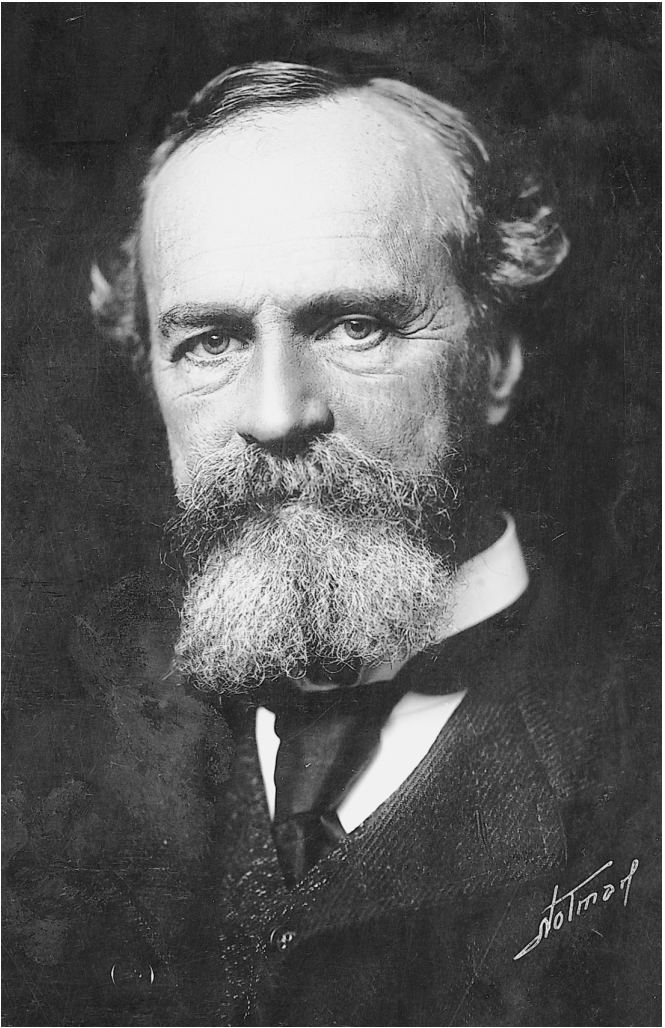
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Chapter 1

What is psychology? How do you study it?

In 1890 William James (Figure 1), the American philosopher and physician and one of the founders of modern psychology, defined psychology as ‘the science of mental life’ and this definition can still provide a starting point for our understanding today. We all have a mental life and therefore have some idea about what this means, even though it can be studied in rats or monkeys as well as in people. However it is only a starting point. New ways of studying the brain, and of understanding its structure and workings, provide us with fascinating information about the determinants of our mental lives. Improved technology means that activity in the brain can now be objectively observed and measured. However, there is much we do not know about the relationships between subjective experience and the brain, and psychologists are still making hypotheses, or informed guesses, about how the two kinds of knowledge—the subjective and the objective—are linked.

Like most psychologists, William James was particularly interested in human psychology, which he thought consisted of certain basic elements: thoughts and feelings, a physical world which exists in time and space, and a way of knowing about these things. For each of us, this knowledge comes from our individual interactions with the world and from the thoughts and feelings linked with these experiences. For this reason, it is easy for us to



1. William James (1842-1910)