

Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) Contribution

The Study of Conscious Experience

Wundt's psychology relied on the experimental methods of the natural sciences, particularly the techniques used by the physiologists. Wundt adapted these scientific methods of investigation for the new psychology and proceeded to study its subject matter in the same way physical scientists were studying their own subject matter. Thus, the *Zeitgeist* in physiology and philosophy helped shape both the methods of investigation of the new psychology and its subject matter.

The subject matter of Wundt's psychology was, in a word, consciousness. In a broad sense, the impact of nineteenth-century empiricism and associationism was at least partly reflected in Wundt's system. In Wundt's view, consciousness included many different parts and could be studied by the method of analysis or reduction. Wundt wrote, "The first step in the investigation of a fact must therefore be a description of the individual elements ... of which it consists" (quoted in Diamond, 1980a, p. 85).

Beyond that point, however, there is little similarity between Wundt's approach and the viewpoint of the majority of the empiricists and associationists. Wundt did not agree with the idea that the elements of consciousness were static (so-called atoms of the mind), which were passively connected by some mechanical process of association. Instead, Wundt believed that consciousness was active in organizing its own content. Hence, the study of the elements, content, or structure of consciousness alone would provide only a beginning to understanding psychological processes.

Voluntarism Because Wundt focused on the mind's self-organizing capacity, he labeled his system voluntarism, a term he derived from the word volition, defined as the act or power of willing. Voluntarism refers to the power of the will to organize the mind's contents into higher-level thought processes. Wundt emphasized not the elements themselves, as had the British empiricists and associationists (and as Wundt's student Titchener would later do), but rather the process of actively organizing or synthesizing those elements. It is important to remember, however, that although Wundt claimed that the conscious mind had the power to synthesize elements into higher-level cognitive processes, he nevertheless recognized that the elements of consciousness were basic. Without the elements, there would be nothing for the mind to organize.

Mediate and immediate experience According to Wundt, psychologists should be concerned with the study of immediate experience rather than mediate experience. Mediate experience provides us with information or knowledge about something other than the elements of an experience. This is the usual form in which we use experience to acquire knowledge about our world. When we look at a rose and say, "The rose is red," for example, this statement implies that our primary interest is in the flower and not in the fact that we are perceiving something called "redness."

However, the immediate experience of looking at the flower is not in the object itself but is instead in the experience of something that is red. For Wundt, immediate experience is unbiased or untainted by any personal interpretations, such as describing the experience of the

rose's red color in terms of the object—the flower—itself. Similarly, when we describe our own feelings of discomfort from a toothache, we are reporting our immediate experience. If we were simply to say, "I have a toothache," then we would be concerned with mediate experience.

In Wundt's view, basic human experiences—such as the experiences of redness or of discomfort—form the states of consciousness (the mental elements) that the mind actively organizes. Wundt's goal was to analyze the mind into its elements, its component parts, just as the natural scientists were working to break down their subject matter—the physical universe. The ideas of the Russian chemist Dimitri Mendeleev in

developing the periodic table of chemical elements supported Wundt's aim. Historians have suggested that Wundt may have been striving to develop a "periodic table" of the mind (Marx & Cronan-Hillix, 1987).