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The Thought And Character Of William James.



Book Information

Paperback

Publisher: Harvard Univ. Press (1948)

ASIN: B000O6LUDG

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Best Sellers Rank: #2,260,503 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #295 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Movements > Pragmatism

Customer Reviews

William James was as incongruent as his philosophy; and I don't mean this sardonically. He was a lover both of art and science; both of the unity of the whole and the plurality of parts; both of the rationalistic and the sentimental parts of life. It is always surprising to me not that he could be all these things, but how well he balanced them all. Whenever one trait would come to the forefront, James almost instinctively checked it with an equal and opposite impulse. This book gives us a front-row seat to watch James's balancing act up close! By my estimates, a little over half of this book's text is letters either from or to James (by friends such as Peirce, Holmes, Dewey, Bergson, and his brother Henry). The author does a good job weaving these letters together with biographical information; with this mixture, he does two things. He puts James's life in the context of his philosophy (philosophies?) and puts his philosophy(-ies) in the context of his life. The best part, to me, was the author's ability to discourse on each book James wrote integrating its philosophy with the events of James's world at the time. As with most biographies, this one does have a tendency (too much so in my opinion) to psychologize in ways that, to me, seem stretching. The last two chapters, for instance, on James's "Morbid Traits" and his "Benign Traits" are like a psychological summary of James, often identifying traits James possessed as ones that are hinted at in his works (particularly the Varieties of Religious Experience). While sections like these can be interesting, they can also (as these two are) become overkill. I read the rest of the book (which psychologizes but keeps it to a minimum) and skimmed these two chapters. Otherwise, this is a great biography.

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