Major Schools of Thought in Psychology

When psychology was first established as a science separate from biology and philosophy, the debate over how to describe and explain the human mind and behavior began. The first school of thought, structuralism, was advocated by the founder of the first psychology lab, Wilhelm Wundt. Almost immediately, other theories began to emerge and vie for dominance in psychology. The following are some of the major schools of thought that have influenced our knowledge and understanding of psychology:

**Structuralism vs. Functionalism:** Structuralism was the first school of psychology, and focused on breaking down mental processes into the most basic components. Major structuralist thinkers include Wilhelm Wundt and Edward Titchener. Functionalism formed as a reaction to the theories of the structuralist school of thought and was heavily influenced by the work of William James. Major functionalist thinkers included John Dewey and Harvey Carr.

**Behaviorism:** Behaviorism became the dominant school of thought during the 1950s. Based upon the work of thinkers such as John B. Watson, Ivan Pavlov, and B. F. Skinner, behaviorism holds that all behavior can be explained by environmental causes, rather than by internal forces. Behaviorism is focused on observable behavior. Theories of learning including classical conditioning and operant conditioning were the focus of a great deal of research.

**Psychoanalysis:** Sigmund Freud was the found of psychodynamic approach. This school of thought emphasizes the influence of the unconscious mind on behavior. Freud believed that the human mind was composed of three elements: the id, the ego, and the superego. Other major psychodynamic thinkers include Anna Freud, Carl Jung, and Erik Erikson.

**Humanistic Psychology:** Humanistic psychology developed as a response to psychoanalysis and behaviorism. Humanistic psychology instead focused on individual free will, personal growth, and self-actualization. Major humanist thinkers included Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers.

**Gestalt Psychology:** Gestalt psychology is based upon the idea that we experience things as unified wholes. This approach to psychology began in Germany and Austria during the late 19th century in response to the molecular approach of structuralism. Rather that breaking down thoughts and behavior to their smallest element, the gestalt psychologists believed that you must look at the whole of experience. According to the gestalt thinkers, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

**Cognitive Psychology:** Cognitive psychology is the branch of psychology that studies mental processes including how people think, perceive, remember, and learn. As part of the larger field of cognitive science, this branch of psychology is related to other disciplines including neuroscience, philosophy, and linguistics. One of the most influential theories from this school of thought was the stages of cognitive development theory proposed by Jean Piaget.