



The Stream of Consciousness

William James

Imagine yourself performing some simple errand, like going to the drugstore for a tube of toothpaste. Your mind, if it functioned the way the nineteenth century Romantic thought it did, would work somewhat as follows: “I am going to the drugstore for a tube of toothpaste. I need the toothpaste because I have none left at home. Toothpaste keeps my teeth clean. I will buy the large economy size because that friendly TV announcer advised me to. . . .” Then, the subject of toothpaste resolved, your mind would turn blank until you reached the drugstore.

But you know from experience that your mind does not stay on a single track in any such neat fashion. Nor does it blank out when a topic is exhausted. You know that even when going on prosaic errands after toothpaste your mind wanders off in all directions, ceaselessly, as it does when you listen to a lecture or to music, or read a weighty book. You know therefore, that the straight-line introspection of Stendhal and Cheyney is only part of the story.

That the mind wanders is obvious. That its activity is ceaseless is obvious too. Yet it took more than a hundred years from the time of Kant until the ceaseless, wandering quality of mental activity was formally recognized. The man who stated this fact about thinking was William James, who in “The Stream of Consciousness” uses the impersonal language of reason to describe the mind as a torrent of activity.

Within each personal consciousness, thought is sensibly continuous. I can only define “continuous” as that which is without breach, crack, or division. I have already said that the breach from one mind to another is perhaps the greatest breach in nature. The only breaches that can well be conceived to occur within the limits of a single mind would either be interruptions, time-gaps during which the consciousness went out altogether to come into existence again at a later moment; or they would be breaks in the quality, or content, of the thought, so abrupt that the segment that followed had no connection whatever with the one that went before. The proposition that within each personal consciousness thought feels continuous, means two things:

1. That even where there is a time-gap the consciousness after it feels as if it belonged together with the consciousness before it, as another part of the same self;
2. That the changes from one moment to another in the quality of the consciousness are never absolutely abrupt.

The case of the time-gaps, as the simplest, shall be taken first. And first of all, a word about time-gaps of which the consciousness may not be itself aware.

[In a previous essay] we saw that such time-gaps existed, and that they might be more numerous than is usually supposed. If the consciousness is not aware of them, it cannot feel them as interruptions. In the unconsciousness produced by nitrous oxide and other anaesthetics, in that of epilepsy and fainting, the broken edges of the sentient life may meet and merge over the gap, much as the feelings of space of the opposite margins of the “blind spot” meet and merge over that objective interruption to the sensitiveness of the eye. Such consciousness as

this, whatever it be for the onlooking psychologist, is for itself unbroken. It feels unbroken; a waking day of it is sensibly a unit as long as that day lasts, in the sense in which the hours themselves are units, as having all their parts next each other, with no intrusive alien substance between. To expect the consciousness to feel the interruptions of its objective continuity as gaps, would be like expecting the eye to feel a gap of silence because it does not hear, or the ear to feel a gap of darkness because it does not see. So much for the gaps that are unfelt.

With the felt gaps the case is different. On waking from sleep, we usually know that we have been unconscious, and we often have an accurate judgment of how long. The judgment here is certainly an inference from sensible signs, and its ease is due to long practice in the particular field. The result of it, however, is that the consciousness is, for itself, not what it was in the former case, but interrupted and discontinuous, in the mere sense of the words. But in the other sense of continuity, the sense of the parts being inwardly connected and belonging together because they are parts of a common whole, the consciousness remains sensibly continuous and one. What now is the common whole? The natural name for it is myself, I, or me.

When Paul and Peter wake up in the same bed, and recognize that they have been asleep, each one of them mentally reaches back and makes connection with but one of the two streams of thought which were broken by the sleeping hours. As the current of an electrode buried in the ground unerringly finds its way to its own similarly buried mate, across no matter how much intervening earth; so Peter's present instantly finds out Peter's past, and never by mistake knits itself on to that of Paul. Paul's thought in turn is as little liable to go astray. The past thought of Peter is appropriated by the present Peter alone. He may have a knowledge, and a correct one too, of what Paul's last drowsy states of mind were as he sank into sleep, but it is an entirely different sort of knowledge, from that which he has of his own last states. He remembers his own states, whilst he only conceives Paul's. Remembrance is like direct feeling; its object is suffused with a warmth and intimacy to which no object of mere conception ever attains. This quality of warmth and intimacy and immediacy is what Peter's present thought also possesses for itself. So sure as this present is me, is mine, it says, so sure is anything else that comes with the same warmth and intimacy and immediacy, me and mine. What the qualities called warmth and intimacy may in themselves be will have to be matter for future consideration. But whatever past feelings appear with those qualities must be admitted to receive the greeting of the present mental state, to be owned by it, and accepted as belonging together with it in a common self. This community of self is what the time-gap cannot break in twain, and is why a present thought, although not ignorant of the time-gap, can still regard itself as continuous with certain chosen portions of the past.

Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as "chain" or "train" do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A "river" or a "stream" are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life. But now there appears, even within the limits of the same self, and between thoughts all of which alike have this same sense of belonging together, a kind of jointing and separateness among the parts, of which this statement seems to take no account. I refer to the breaks that are produced by sudden contrasts in the quality of the successive segments of the stream of thought. If the words "chain" and "train" had no natural fitness in them, how came such words to be used at all? Does not a loud explosion rend the consciousness upon which it abruptly breaks, in twain? Does not every sudden shock, appearance of a new object, or change in a sensation, create a real interruption, sensibly felt as such, which cuts the conscious stream across at the moment at which it appears? Do not such interruptions smite us every hour of our lives, and have we the

right, in their presence, still to call our consciousness a continuous stream?

This objection is based partly on a confusion and partly on a superficial introspective view. The confusion is between the thoughts themselves, taken as subjective facts, and the things of which they are aware. It is natural to make this confusion, but easy to avoid it when once put on one's guard. The things are discrete and discontinuous; they do pass before us in a train or chain, making often explosive appearances and rending each other in twain. But their comings and goings and contrasts no more break the flow of the thought that thinks them than they break the time and the space in which they lie. A silence may be broken by a thunder-clap, and we may be so stunned and confused for a moment by the shock as to give no instant account to ourselves of what has happened. But that very confusion is a mental state, and a state that passes us straight over from the silence to the sound. The transition between the thought of one object and the thought of another is no more a break in the thought than a joint in a bamboo is a break in the wood. It is a part of the consciousness as much as the joint is a part of the bamboo.

The superficial introspective view is the overlooking, even when the things are contrasted with each other most violently, of the large amount of affinity that may still remain between the thoughts by whose means they are cognized. Into the awareness of the thunder itself the awareness of the previous silence creeps and continues; for what we hear when the thunder crashes is not thunder pure, but thunder-breaking-upon-silence-and-contrasting-with-it. Our feeling of the same objective thunder, coming in this way, is quite different from what it would be were the thunder a continuation of previous thunder. The thunder itself we believe to abolish and exclude the silence; but the feeling of the thunder is also a feeling of the silence as just gone; and it would be difficult to find in the actual concrete consciousness of man a feeling so limited to the present as not to have an inkling of anything that went before. Here, again, language works against our perception of the truth. We name our thoughts simply, each after its thing, as if each knew its own thing and nothing else. What each really knows is clearly the thing it is named for, with dimly perhaps a thousand other things. It ought to be named after all of them, but it never is. Some of them are always things known a moment ago more clearly; others are things to be known more clearly a moment hence. Our own bodily position, attitude, condition, is one of the things of which some awareness, however inattentive, invariably accompanies the knowledge of whatever else we know. We think; and as we think we feel our bodily selves as the seat of the thinking. If the thinking be our thinking, it must be suffused through all its parts with that peculiar warmth and intimacy that make it come as ours. . . .

Take a look at the brain. We believe the brain to be an organ whose internal equilibrium is always in a state of change, — the change affecting every part. The pulses of change are doubtless more violent in one place than in another, their rhythm more rapid at this time than at that. As in a kaleidoscope revolving at a uniform rate, although the figures are always rearranging themselves, there are instants during which the transformation seems minute and interstitial and almost absent, followed by others when it shoots with magical rapidity, relatively stable forms thus alternating with forms we should not distinguish if seen again; so in the brain the perpetual rearrangement must result in some forms of tension lingering relatively long, whilst others simply come and pass. But if consciousness corresponds to the fact of rearrangement itself, why, if the rearrangement stop not, should the consciousness ever cease? And if a lingering rearrangement brings with it one kind of consciousness, why should not a swift rearrangement bring another kind of consciousness as peculiar as the rearrangement itself? The lingering consciousnesses, if of simple objects, we call "sensations" or "images," according as they are vivid or faint; if of complex objects, we call them "percepts" when vivid, "concepts" or "thoughts" when faint. For the swift consciousnesses we have only those names

of “transitive states,” or “feelings of relation,” which we have used. As the brain-changes are continuous, so do all these consciousnesses melt into each other like dissolving views. Properly they are but one protracted consciousness, one unbroken stream.

FOR ANALYSIS

1. What does James mean by time-gaps of which the mind is not aware? How does he contrast them with felt gaps?
2. What is James saying in his illustration involving Paul and Peter?
3. According to James, thought is continuous despite: (1) time-gaps, and (2) time changes. How does James show that thought is continuous despite time-gaps? Does his demonstration agree with your own experience?
4. How does James show that thought is continuous despite time changes, such as the change from sleeping to waking?
5. According to James, the belief that there are interruptions in thought is based on two errors. These errors result from: (1) confusion, and (2) a superficial introspective view. What is the confusion that tends to suggest interruptions in thought?
6. What does James mean by a superficial introspective view? How does it suggest that there are interruptions in thought?
7. What parallel does James draw between the function of the brain and the function of the consciousness?
8. What, in your own words, does James mean by the term “stream of consciousness”? Can you furnish a specific example of how it functions?

FOR DISCUSSION

1. James’s essay is scientific both in tone and diction. How scientific do you think his theory of the stream of consciousness is?
2. How is Stendhal’s use of ellipses refuted by the discoveries of James? Would it be valid to claim that the stream of consciousness is based on introspection but is a step beyond it?

William James. *Principles of Psychology*. London: McMillan and Co., 1891. Introduction and questions from Joseph Henry Satin. *Ideas in Context*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958. Text in public domain.

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