

Stream of Consciousness

It is now commonplace to invoke the “stream” metaphor when describing the felt nature of experience. In short, the “stream of consciousness” metaphor highlights the inner coherence and phenomenal unity of consciousness states, such as thoughts and perceptions, as they pass one into the next. Despite its current ubiquity, this way of characterizing consciousness is not a modern convention. The “stream” or “flow” metaphor can be found in descriptions of mind and reality dating back to a number of ancient sources, including the fragments attributed to the presocratic thinker Heraclitus, the Upanishadic writings of the Hindu canon, and various Buddhist and Taoist texts and commentaries. However, it was the American psychologist and philosopher William James who gave the expression a certain technical significance and galvanized its contemporary usage.

James’s article “On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology” (1894) and his monumental *Principles of Psychology* (1890)—particularly chapter ten of volume one, “The Stream of Thought”—are the main sources of this notion, although it is an idea that is continually revisited and worked over throughout his corpus. First, it is important to note that for James the “stream of consciousness” metaphor is posited as a phenomenological descriptive. James is highly critical of standard empiricist conceptions of experience under which the content of consciousness is reducible to atomistic bits or “simple ideas”—such as bare sensations—that are then built up into composite structures that became conscious content as experienced by a subject. For James, conscious experience is a rich, highly-structured affair *all the way down*. What James calls the

“substantive parts” of the stream of conscious at a given moment—“subjective states” such as thoughts, perceptions, intentions, beliefs, etc.—are always embedded in a field of experience that is phenomenally alive with felt connections and relations *between* these “substantive parts”. James terms these felt connections “transitive relations”. And transitive relations as essential for consciousness as are the substantive parts themselves. Both substantive parts *and* transitive relations are constitutive elements of the stream of consciousness. James’s “stream” metaphor is thus meant to capture the experiential quality of consciousness from the inside, including this holistic interrelatedness that gives consciousness its inner cohesiveness and structural integrity.

In the *Principles*, James offers five “characters” of consciousness that reinforce his stream characterization. For James, the *phenomenal* unity of consciousness—its streaming nature—emerges from the *functional* unity of its constituent “characters”, as these characters are enacted within our concrete experience of the world. Since the first three characters are the most important for understanding the stream they will be the ones here considered. The first character of the stream of consciousness James discusses is the fact that its states collectively “tend to Personal Form”; that is, they are all part of a “personal consciousness”. This means two things. First, the states comprising the stream are all disclosed in a first-personal mode of givenness. In other words, they are private and privileged, part of a mind that “keeps its own thoughts to itself”. Additionally, each state of the stream bears an experiential quality. The various states comprising the stream are intrinsically subjective, in that they *feel* a certain way for the subject who experiences them.

Second, James observes that the states comprising the stream of consciousness are always changing. They exhibit an inner phenomenal movement governed by “sensible intervals of time” and not sequential clock-time. For instance, the same event—such as attending a symphony—can be experienced in radically different ways by different perceivers. For the one, the event is a highly pleasurable experience and seems to end almost as soon as it began. For another, the performance is a tedious affair and drags on indefinitely. Thus, the stream exhibits its own internal sensible time. But importantly, no state in the stream is numerically identical to any other state, despite the fact that multiple states can take the same object of experience. This is because “experience is remoulding us every moment”, and therefore “nothing can be conceived as the same without being conceived in a novel state of mind”. Novelty and flux are thus invariant features of the stream of phenomenal consciousness.

But James’s third observation, that the states of the stream are “sensibly continuous”, describes how this novelty and flux is organized into a cohesive stream of personal consciousness—in other words, consciousness that is *owned*. It is thus perhaps the most important feature of his characterization of the stream. For James, that states of the stream are sensibly continuous means simply that they flow one into the next “without breach, crack or division”. Consciousness as lived “does not appear to itself chopped up in bits” since “it is nothing jointed”. Rather, “a ‘river’ or ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described”. Phenomenologically, this fact refers to the felt relatedness of the states of the stream *in their flowing*. A given state is felt to be an appropriate successor to the state(s) which preceded it, both in that it follows

immediately from the preceding state(s), as well as that it carries over or appropriates shared content that links it back up with the preceding state(s).

Beyond this phenomenological significance, however, the sensible continuity of the stream of consciousness has another important consequence for James. This principle is what gives rise to the feeling that each state in the stream is given to a single, enduring self. The sensible continuity of states thus underwrites the experience of selfhood. For even when there is a temporal gap between certain stream states—such as with sleep or being in a coma—the states which resume *after* the time-gap still feel as if they “belonged together with the consciousness before it, as another part of the same self”. Therefore, not only does each state bear an internal reference to the state(s) which proceed it. Furthermore, it bears reference to a *subject* of those states who experiences them. Crucially, then, sensible continuity is responsible for subjectivity. The “stream of consciousness” is thus representative of James’s life-long intellectual goal of remaining faithful to the inner dynamics and experiential realities of our conscious life.

References and Further Reading

James, W. (1884). “On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology”.

James, W. (1890). *Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols.

Joel W. Krueger