Abstract: One of the aspects of consciousness deserving of study is what might be called its subjective unity—the way in which, though conscious experience moves from object to object, and can be said to have distinct ‘states,’ it nevertheless in some sense apparently forms a singular flux divided only by periods of unconsciousness. The work of William James provides a valuable, and rather unique, source of analysis of this feature of consciousness; however, in my opinion, this component of James’ theory of the mind has so far gone under-emphasised in the scholarly literature. This paper undertakes some philosophical geography, trying to draw out and elucidate some of the relevant ideas from James’ corpus, and also subjects those ideas to some analysis to try and assist in judgements of their current importance.

Like a bird’s life, [the stream of consciousness] seems to be made up of an alternation of flights and perchings.

(William James, Principles of Psychology, p. 243)

This rather well known metaphor lucidly captures a rather neglected, but very significant, aspect of William James’ account of phenomenal consciousness: his distinction between substantive states of consciousness and the transitive ones which intervene temporally between them. James insists that though consciousness is a flux, it is also differentiated: the bird’s life is a seamless unity, but it also contains two different kinds of activity, flying and perching.

However, as James himself presciently noted (1890, pp. 243 ff.), we tend to concentrate our attention—both phenomenological and theoretical—upon our substantive mental states. And so it has come to pass that, in the scholarly literature on James, interest in the transitional parts of the stream of consciousness, or in their distinction from substantive synchronic mental states, has been sparse. Such as it is, it has tended to come from those working within the framework of traditional Continental phenomenology, such as Alfred Schuetz (1941), Aron Gurwitsch (1943), and Bruce Wilshire (1968). Perhaps partly for this reason, interest in the transitive parts has not yet found its way into contemporary philosophical debates on the problem of consciousness, and in particular not into the emerging new interdisciplinary field of ‘consciousness studies,’ even for those most influenced by the work of William James. Thus, for example, thinkers like W. E. Cooper (1990) and Owen Flanagan (1991) generally place almost no emphasis on the transitive parts. Tim Shallice (1988, heavily influenced by James here) enumerates what he calls the two ‘structural’ properties of consciousness—being sensibly continuous, and being divided into foreground and background—but takes

1 Ralph Barton Perry, James’ student and first and perhaps best commentator, phrased it thus: “The practically habituated mind flies from perch to perch, and is aware of the perch rather than of the passage.” (1938, p. 81)

2 Perhaps this circumstance would not have pleased James, who apparently took some pleasure in deflating the “unspeakable Meinong”; that “humbug” Wundt; Kant, whom he called a “mere curio”; and the “sour grapes” of his nemesis Hegel; and who completely ignored the publication of Husserl’s Logische Untersuchungen in 1901, despite Husserl’s idolisation of his own Principles of Psychology and probably despite the urgings of James’ close friend Carl Stumpf—indeed James was even influential in preventing its publication in translation in America until the second half of this century.
the first property as being more or less just obvious, by contrast with the second to which he devotes several pages. David Galin (1996), likewise, takes James to be an important thinker on the flow of consciousness, and inveighs against a lack of interest in James’ notions of the fringe and the nucleus, but he tacitly treats the fringe as a synchronic phenomenon, and never mentions its connection with the transitive parts of the stream of consciousness.

Another part of the reason for this lack of attention to the transitive parts is perhaps the status that has been accorded James’ other description of consciousness as a stream or river, which has been called the “master metaphor” in his account (Flanagan 1992, p. 155).

Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as ‘chain’ and ‘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 (1890, p. 239).

But over-attention to this passage has tended to elide the other Jamesian notion of the passage of phenomenal consciousness as being nevertheless, in a sense, jointed or variegated. The contents of the flow of consciousness

… are discrete and discontinuous; they do pass before us in a train or chain. … But their comings and goings and contrasts no more break the flow of the thought that thinks them than they break the time and space in which they lie. … 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 the bamboo is a break in the wood (1890, p. 240).

In other words, the contents of thought—the substantive parts—are not in fact a stream, in James’ sense; they were correctly described by James’ psychologist predecessors as a “chain,” a differentiated “sequence of differentials.” What makes consciousness akin to a stream is the embedding of these thoughts into transitional parts—conscious activity that intervenes without break between one thought and the next. Conscious awareness, then, is really more accurately described as a bird’s life or bamboo pole than a flowing river; the dominance of the stream metaphor is apt to allow us to lose sight of this.

In this paper I will critically examine James’ notion of the transitive parts of the stream of consciousness, and make some suggestions about the contemporary philosophical importance of this concept. My aim is to do two things: to show it is a more problematic notion than has usually been realized, but to suggest that it is also a more important and fruitful idea than it is usually given credit for in contemporary philosophy of mind.

**The Unity of Consciousness**

I need first to briefly outline some of the main points of James’ view of the stream of consciousness: partly in order to place James’ theory of the transitive parts into some sort of context, but also because some of these points become very important in deciding exactly what James must mean by transitive parts. James begins by noting the following:

Naming our thought by its own objects, we almost all of us assume that as the objects are, so the thought must be. … As each object may come and go, be forgotten and then thought of again, it is held that the thought of it has precisely similar independence, self-identity, and mobility (1890, p. 196).
However, he suggests, we are misled by such considerations. In fact, James holds, there are five, and only five, facts we can introspectively discover about consciousness:

1) “Every thought tends to be part of a personal consciousness”;
2) “Within each personal consciousness thought is always changing”;
3) “Within each personal consciousness thought is sensibly continuous”;
4) “It always appears to deal with objects independent of itself”;
5) “It is interested in some parts of these objects to the exclusion of others, and welcomes or rejects—chooses from among them, in a word—all the while.” (1890, p. 225)

The aspect that interests us here is that thought is sensibly continuous. “Consciousness … does not appear to itself chopped up in bits” (1890, p. 239; 1892, p. 145). In what does this continuity consist? What more can we say about it? We can distinguish between five different ways in which consciousness is a unity, rather than chopped up.

i. The Non-Complexity of Mental States

Mental feelings are not compound: we should not confuse “the combining of objects for that of feelings” (1890, p. 158n). The taste of lemonade, for example, does not combine the tastes of sugar and lemon; rather the physical object combines lemon and sugar, and the resulting taste resembles both. “A higher state is not a lot of lower states; it is itself” (1890, p. 162n). Rather, James, suggests, any ‘units’ of sense data (as discrete tones combining to form a chord) are integrated below the level of consciousness:

the [resulting idea] is itself an immediate psychic fact and bears an immediate relation to the neural state which is its unconditional accompaniment (1890, p. 157).

What is combined, James says, is the nerve processes in the brain, and not anything ‘mental’ (1890, pp. 150–158). Furthermore, all combinations (in this sense), logically speaking, are the effects of their various causes, and not the set of those causes themselves. For example, water consists in the combination H₂O, but all this means is that those constituent atoms, arranged in a certain way (H–O–H) have certain effects upon external media such as our sense organs and various reagents (1890, p. 159). The atoms do not combine in any more substantive way than this: they do not cease to be themselves and blend and become ‘one.’ In summary: combinations involve distinct units operating upon some external body or medium to produce an ‘atomic’ effect within that medium. So, even if it were the case that separate ideas could ‘combine’ to form new ones,

… the compounded idea is an altogether new psychic fact to which the separate ideas stand in the relation, not of constituents, but of occasions of production (1890, p. 161).

(In “The Knowing of Things Together” James modifies this doctrine somewhat. In this later article, he admits that there is a sense in which mental states may be called complex, just as their objects are—but still not because their parts are separable, and certainly not because their parts have an existence more fundamental or long-lived than the complex ideas of which they are a part. (1895, p. 81))

ii. Temporal Connectedness

… [E]ven where there is a time-gap [as in sleep or unconsciousness] the consciousness after it feels as if it belonged together with the consciousness before it, as another part of the same self (1890, p. 237; 1892, p. 145).
Thus consciousness is continuous in the sense of “the parts being inwardly connected and belonging together because they are parts of a common whole” (1890, p. 238). As James memorably puts it: if two people wake up in the same bed, there is no risk of them getting confused about which past stream of thought is connected with which person. “Peter’s present instantly finds out Peter’s past, and never by mistake knits to that of Paul” (1890, p. 238). Even if Peter were to have detailed knowledge of Paul’s “last drowsy states of mind … as he sank into sleep,” there would be no danger of confusion. His knowledge of Paul’s states is of a very different character from that of his own: he remembers his own, but only conceives of Paul’s, and the object of remembrance is “suffused with a warmth and intimacy” that makes it ours (1890, p. 239; 1892, p. 145).

iii. Associational Connectedness

“The changes from one moment to another in the quality [or, roughly, content] of the consciousness are never absolutely abrupt” (1890, p. 237; 1892, p. 145). There are no breaks in thought produced by sudden contrasts of the ‘quality’ of the successive segments, “so abrupt that the segment that followed had no connection whatever with the one that went before” (1890, p. 237). Transitions are part of consciousness just as the joint in bamboo is part of the wood.

There is always, James says, some affinity between any two apparently contrasting, juxtaposed thoughts. “What we hear when the thunder crashes is not thunder pure, but thunder-breaking-upon-silence-and-contrasting-with-it” (1890, p. 240). It follows from this, then, that thoughts cannot be identified simply with the object of their attention: at any one time, our thought includes consciousness of:

1. some of what has just passed, “things known a moment ago more clearly.”
2. some of what is to come, “things to be known more clearly a moment hence.”
3. some awareness of present conditions, such as “our bodily position, attitude, condition” and/or “that peculiar warmth and intimacy that make [thoughts] come as ours” (1890, pp. 241–242).

Among other things, this gives consciousness its sense “of the whence and the whither that always accompanies its flows” (1890, p. 242).

iv. The Transitive Parts

Now we come to the transitive parts themselves. When we introspect we are aware, James asserts, of passages or transitions between our more stable thoughts. In lieu of interpretation for the moment, let me quote James wholesale:

As we take, in fact, a general view of the wonderful stream of our consciousness, what strikes us first is this different pace of its parts. Like a bird’s life, it seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings. … The resting-places are usually occupied by sensorial imaginations of some sort, whose peculiarity is that they can be held before the mind for an indefinite time, and contemplated without changing; the places of flight are filled with thoughts of relations, static or dynamic, that for the most part obtain between the matters contemplated in the periods of comparative rest.

Let us call the resting-places the ‘substantive parts,’ and the places of flight the ‘transitive parts,’ of the stream of consciousness. It then appears that the main end of our thinking is at all times the attainment of

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4 This phenomenon, James says, is paralleled in brain activity: any nervous state of the brain co-exists with, and is affected by, the dying vibrations of the previous states and the waxing excitement of incipient processes.
some other substantive part than the one from which we have just been dislodged. And we may say that the main use of the transitive parts is to lead us from one substantive conclusion to another (1890, pp. 243; 1892, pp. 146).

It is hard to introspect the transitive parts for what they are, James says: to focus on them is to annihilate them. They necessarily cease, thereby, to be flights to a conclusion, and become substantive things themselves. Nor can they be studied by moving to a conclusion and then looking back, James claims: “if we wait till the conclusion be reached, it so exceeds them in vigor and stability that it quite eclipses and swallows them up in its glare” (1890, pp. 244–245; 1892, p. 147). So to ask the proponent of transitive parts to produce them, is unfair, just as it was unfair of Zeno and his camp to demand of the advocates of motion to produce the place an arrow is when it moves (1890, p. 244; 1892, p. 147). We must therefore beware of emphasising the substantive elements unduly—for example, ignoring the transitive feeling between silence and thunder, “and of treating their boundary as a sort of break in the mind” (1890, p. 244). James suggests that to ignore transitive elements is to treat breaks between substantive parts as breaks in the mind (1890, p. 244).

James notes that both the ‘Sensationalists’ and the ‘Intellectualists’ deny transitive parts because they are “equally unable to point to any distinct substantive feelings in which they were known” (1890, pp. 244–245; 1892, p. 148). But, James insists, we do have feelings which correspond to the relations between things: “so surely as relations between objects exist in rerum naturā, so surely, and more surely, do feelings exist to which these relations are known” (1890, p. 245; 1892, p. 148). We should admit to feelings of and if and by just as readily as blue and cold, James asserts (1890, pp. 245–246; 1892, p. 148).\(^5\)

v. The Fringes

There are also other ‘unnamed states or qualities of states’ that, James claims, are also important and unrecognized: the ‘fringes’ of consciousness (1892, p. 149). These feelings denote relations, tendencies, connections, expectancies. For example:

a) ‘Hark!’ brings about an attitude of expectancy—“a sense of the direction from which an impression is about to come” (1890, pp. 250–251; 1892, p. 149). And this sense differs from that conjured by other words, such as ‘Look!’ or ‘Wait!’

b) The effort of trying to recall a forgotten name involves a gap in our consciousness, but one where “a sort of wraith of the name is in it, beckoning us in a given direction,” and immediately rejecting wrong names (1890, p. 251; 1892, p. 149). And this ‘gap’ is different for different words: they have different ‘shapes,’ mould themselves to different possible sounds or rhythms—e.g. they reject different candidates. This difference, James asserts, is one of feeling. They are the feelings of different absences, not the absence of feeling (1890, pp. 252–253; 1892, p. 149).

c) Experiences sometimes can be “recognized as familiar, as having been enjoyed before, though we cannot name it or say where or when” (1890, p. 252). The only name we have for this is ‘sense of familiarity.’

d) Words and phrases denoting relations—such as ‘but,’ ‘either one or the other,’ ‘although it is,\(^5\) Consider, again, the brain: it is in a continual process of rearrangement. “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?” (1890, p. 246; 1892, p. 149). However, “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” (1890, pp. 247–248).
nevertheless’—have a ‘felt meaning’ which is more than simply their sound: it is not true that, as we read them, “there is nothing more in our minds than the words themselves as they pass” (1890, p. 252). The same is true of all the other parts of speech that are nothing but ‘signs of direction’ in thought, such as ‘who?’ ‘when?’ ‘no,’ or ‘not yet.’

c) The intention to say (or perhaps think): “One may admit that a good third of our psychic life consists in these rapid premonitory perspective views of schemes of thought not yet articulate” (1890, p. 253).

Consciousness, then, has a field of view—a horizon: “this permanent consciousness of whither our thought is going” (1890, p. 255) These feelings are not sensorial images, however, and they are a very important part of our stream of thought.

Let us use the words psychic overtone, suffusion, or fringe, to designate the influence of a faint brain-process upon our thought, as it makes us aware of relations or objects but dimly perceived (1890, p. 258).

The Transitive Parts

Our concern here is the transitive parts. But what exactly are they supposed to be? And are they consistent with the rest of what James says about the stream of thought? Despite the somewhat cavalier way the temporal unity of consciousness can sometimes be treated in the modern literature, these things are not, on the face of it, fully clear. There are two major issues here: the way in which a unitary flux can also be partitioned; and the problem of making consistent James’ claims about the transitions in consciousness.

The Partitioning of Consciousness.

James says, often and at length, that the stream of consciousness is a flux—that it does not come divided into parts. How then can it come divided into transitive and substantive parts?

Consciousness, as a process in time, offers the paradoxes which have been found in all continuous change. There are no ‘states’ in such a thing, any more than there are facets in a circle, or places where an arrow ‘is’ when it flies. … [T]he actual present is only the joint between the past and future and has no breadth of its own. Where everything is change and process, how can we talk of ‘state’? (1892, pp. 399–400)

The solution must be to read onto James the following position: that the flux of consciousness comes undivided, but that we individuate ‘states’ within it, after the fact. James mentions that the way we tend to do this is by identifying ideas by their objects (1890, p. 196). This seems fairly straightforward for mental

6 “Sensorial images are stable psychic facts; we can hold them still and look at them as long as we like. These bare images of logical movement, on the contrary, are psychic transitions, always on the wing, so to speak, and not to be glimpsed except in flight” (1890, p. 253).

7 “Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in … the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it—or rather that is fused into one with it and has become bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh; leaving it, it is true, an image of the same thing it was before, but making it an image of that thing newly taken and freshly understood” (1890, p. 255; 1892, p. 151).

8 “The concrete pulses of experience appear pent in by no such definite limits as our conceptual substitutes for them are confined by. They run into each other continuously and seem to interpenetrate. What in them is relation and what is matter is hard to discern.” (1909, p. 294)
imagery—these mental states are to be individuated along the same lines as the things they are images of. But what of the transitive parts? Do they have objects with which to be identified? James thinks so—in the shape of relations. James believes in the empirical reality of relations, conjunctive as well as disjunctive.

Every examiner of the sensible life in concreto must see that relations of every sort, of time, space, difference, likeness, change, rate, cause, or what not, are just as integral members of the sensational flux as terms are, and that conjunctive relations are just as true members of the flux as disjunctive relations are. (1909, p. 293)

However, the members of the fringes also seem to be identified in exactly the same way: as being felt but non-imagistic relations. What, then, differentiates the fringes from the transitive parts?

The Issue of Transition

The problem here is the following: are there, consistently with James’ writings, temporal intervals between substantive thoughts, which are filled up with transitive parts? Or, to put it another way, what is to prevent transitive parts from simply collapsing into the ‘temporal’ aspects of substantive parts—that is, what holds the fringes and the transitive parts apart?

James provides an analysis of what passes through our mind when we utter the phrase the pack of cards is on the table (1890, pp. 278–83). He rejects the notion that this time-slice can be divided up such that, at one point, we have only the thought the pack and at a somewhat later time only the thought the table. His claim is as follows:

I say of these time-parts that we cannot take any one of them so short that it will not after some fashion or other be a thought of the whole object ‘the pack of cards is on the table.’ They melt into each other like dissolving views, and no two of them feel the object just alike, but each feels the total object in a unitary undivided way (1890, p. 279).

Rather, what happens is that parts of the thought are to the fore at certain times—certain objects will be “more emphatically present to the mind” (1890, p. 280).

All this seems in conflict with the notion of transitive parts: there is no part of such a thought which is separable from the substantive part of the thought, and which can be identified with a relation. The relation expressed by ‘on’ in this sentence, for example, is, at every time slice, all wrapped up with the rest of the thought.

The tiniest feeling that we can possibly have comes with an earlier and a later part and with a sense of their continuous progression. (1909, p. 294)

Further, James explicitly asserts that transitive parts are not to be seen as some kind of connective tissue between separated substantial parts. They are not “some sort of psychic material by which sensations, in themselves separate, are made to cohere together” (1890, p. 258n).

Possible Readings

What are we to do here? How, specifically, are we to understand the transitive parts? I think there are at

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9 Although, since both mental and physical are for James but two aspects of the reality of ‘pure experience,’ there seems no reason to assume that ‘the physical world’ comes divided itself (in order to act as a kind of template for the cutting up of the mental).

10 “Between all [the substantive elements of thought] there is ‘transitive’ consciousness, and the words and images are ‘fringed,’ and not as discrete as to a careless view they seem” (1890, p. 271).
least three interpretative possibilities:

a) **Content/object**: we could rely on the difference between the objects of these different kinds of thought. Thus, the distinction to be made between imagistic and non-imagistic types of thought is reasonably clear; perhaps we can find a similar distinction within the domain of non-imagistic thought to divide up transitive parts and fringes.

b) **Stability**: we could place great weight on James’ comment that some kinds of thought “can be held before the mind for an indefinite time, and contemplated without changing” whereas the transitive parts cannot (1890, p. 243; 1892, p. 146).11

c) **Speed**: we could seize upon James’ comments to the effect that transitive parts “obtain between the matters contemplated in the periods of comparative rest” and that the distinction is based upon “this different pace of [the] parts” of the stream of consciousness (1890, p. 243; 1892, p. 146).

My view is that the last is the most plausible—the least bad of a set of rather unsatisfactory alternatives. The first seems to hold out little prospect of uniquely identifying transitive parts within James’ account of the stream of thought: it seems to irremediably blur the distinction with the fringes qua elements of the unities which are the substantive parts. For example, both the fringes and the transitive parts, according to James, include feelings of relations of continuity and connection of a temporal and logical sort—“the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead” (1890, p. 258).

The second also appears unable to bear the weight of interpretation. Is it, for example, true that we cannot “hold the concept of a relation before the mind indefinitely”—have not philosophers been able to do so at least long enough to write a weighty tome on, for example, the ‘or’ relation? Surely what James means to say here is that when we do so the relation ceases to be a transitive part and becomes a substantive part. And, again, the prospects of using this criterion to differentiate fringes and transitive parts seem bleak.

So we are left with the third possibility: transitive parts are precisely those phases of consciousness that we move through rapidly and more or less imagelessly in order to arrive at a substantive ‘conclusion.’ Thus, in contradistinction from the fringes, they are fast-moving segments of subjective time rather than aspects of a substantive time-segment. This does seem to mesh fairly well with most of what James has said about the transitive parts, and fits nicely with the ‘bird’s life’ metaphor with which we began. The most basic distinction between transitive parts and the rest of the stream of thought, on this reading, is pace, so the analogy of “an alternation of flights and perchings” seems an apt one. There are also happy overtones to the simile: for instance, a bird’s flight is, in some way, directed and guided—and so, according to James, are the swift transitions of the transitive parts. “Relation … to our topic or interest is constantly felt … particularly the relation of harmony and discord, of furtherance or hindrance of the topic” (1890, p. 259) And, like a bird’s life, the stream of thought, including its transitive parts, is a unity.

However, it arguably requires the assumption that we have frequent moments of imageless thought, so to speak between images. I do not recall coming across this assertion in James. And there are certain problematic quotes: consider, for example, his description of the fringes as “psychic transitions, always on the wing, so to speak, and not to be glimpsed except in flight” (1890, p. 253).

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11 Schuetz, for example, appears to uncritically hold that substantive parts differ from transitive parts just in that the former “can be held before the mind for an indefinite time,” while the transitive parts are “thoughts of relations, static or dynamic, between the substantive parts.” (1941 p. 448)
Philosophical Importance

What is the philosophical import of all of this? On the face of it, the notion of transitive parts is simply a more or less empirical psychological claim about the contents of our mental life—though this should itself have a great deal of interest to workers in the field of consciousness studies. However, contained within the notion of the transitive parts are a nest of important and substantive philosophical claims and implications. A substantial book could be written on these issues and their connection with the temporal flow of consciousness: here I intend only to give a brief rundown, in order to flag some of the main areas of interest.

The Reality of Relations

The transitive parts consist in the direct mental apprehension of relations. For James, relations are not hypotheses about the connections between experience; they are not patterns imposed upon a neutral universe; they are an empirical and ontological reality. Pure experiences exist and succeed one another; they enter into infinitely varied relations; and these relations are themselves essential parts of the web of experiences. There is a ‘Consciousness’ of these relations for the same reason that there is a ‘Consciousness’ of their terms. As a result, fields of experiences are observable and distinguishable. (1905, p. 9)

James’ defence of this notion is basically in terms of his introspective intuitions about the reality of conscious experience, and his views of the eventual usefulness of this idea for further thought. We might see three clauses here:

a) Relations appear to us as immediately ‘perceived’ reality. Thus the evidence we have suggests the reality of relations.

b) To accept this appearance as truth is pragmatically useful in further theorising, such as James’ Principles.

c) We in fact have independent theoretical evidence for the truth of conscious ‘seemings’ of this kind: the doctrine of pure experience. What we ‘have in our minds’ is not a representation of the object of thought; it is an aspect of the thing itself.

Should we accept all this? Even if we accept his introspective conclusions, it is certainly still open to us to hold to the possibility of James’ hypothesis about relations in the world being false. We might also profess ourselves dissatisfied with the weight of the evidence he produces, and suggest that the burden of proof remains with him. One reason for doing this, it seems, is that James’ theory makes all relations equally ‘real,’ and we might find that conclusion uncomfortable. He need not elide the distinction between, say, stable, lawlike relations and ‘arbitrary’ ones, or between ‘physical’ relations and ‘mental’ ones. But he cannot say that, properly speaking, such and such a relation is a real one (in the sense of being a property of the universe) and this and so is not—any relation we perceive, apparently, we perceive as a genuine property of pure experience.

The Possibility of Imageless Thought

Another important idea to be found in James on this point is the following: transitive parts are a kind of imageless thought. Thinking (by which we mean here the phenomenal flow of thought), therefore, need not

12 “Consciousness does not leap from one ‘substantive’ state to another, but rather is always in ‘felt’ continuity by virtue of the experiencing of ‘transitive’ relationships” (McDermott 1977, p. xxxvi). See also the discussion of time below.
consist in visual or aural imagery, as was often previously assumed. As Aron Gurwitsch puts it:

In these cases we … experience specific mental states from which all imagery either of words or things is absent, and for which it is impossible to account as long as consciousness is assumed to be composed, on the one hand, of sensations, and on the other hands, of ideas, representations, and images of a perfectly definite nature. (1943, p. 458)

James on this point is plausible … but we may still entertain caveats. In particular, he spends at least the bulk of his argumentative efforts in the chapter on 'The Stream of Thought' demonstrating that all thought contains or involves non-imagistic feeling. However, one may hold this and still hold that it is impossible for the mind's eye, while conscious, to be completely black and silent—that, though there are other elements as well, mental experience always contains some imagery.

The Inadequacy of Intellectualizing

A third philosophical consequence which may be distilled from the doctrine of the transitive parts is a critique of the adequacy of the very tools of linguistic philosophy. Here are some reasons:

a) A large, varied and important part of our mental reality is immune to linguistic analysis because its ‘contents’ cannot be named.

b) Concepts do not, at bottom, properly describe the flux of thought and reality, since they necessarily divide it up arbitrarily—it has no joints at which to be cut.

c) It is perhaps the case that much of our logical reasoning is performed through transitive parts. As such, the ‘logical’ relations we actually rely on are, it seems, by definition vague, indescribable, and different every time.

In principle, then, … intellectualism’s edge is broken; it can only approximate to reality, and its logic is inapplicable to our inner life. … I must deafen you to talk, or to the importance of talk, by showing you, as Bergson does, that the concepts we talk with are made for purposes of practice and not for the purposes of insight. Or I must point, point to the mere that of life, and you by inner sympathy must fill out the what for yourselves. … Philosophy [has] been on a false scent since the days of Socrates and Plato. (1909, pp. 296–297)

Relations are sensations, and sensations are fleeting, momentary, particular and unnameable (because constantly changing). They are not the stable, abstract entities of analytic fantasy. “The real units of our immediately-felt life are unlike the units that intellectualist logic holds to and makes its calculations with” (1909, p. 296).

The Impression of Time

Fourthly, it is significant that the experience of continuity, encapsulated in the transitive parts, is felt and not just posited, James asserts. Gurwitsch suggests that for James continuity “is identical with phenomenal

13 Further, he goes on, “we may see that, in James’ opinion, the ‘transitive parts’ not only make up a considerable part of conscious life, but also possess more importance, significance, and value than the ‘substantive parts’ to which they are attached” (p. 462).

14 Though he does spend time, for example in Ch. XVIII of Principles (on imagination), trying to show that particular ideas we may think to be visual need not be so.

15 The main importance of the transitive parts then, for Gurwitsch, is that they make ‘temporality … the fundamental structure of
time” (1943, p. 449). That is, every single mental state is also an awareness of time passing, since it must contain some elements pointing to the past and future.

Hume, by contrast, felt that a succession of ideas was necessary: a single idea cannot give rise to the impression of time. In fact, there is no separate impression of time: the idea of time (like space) stands for the very succession of contents, not for some specific, distinguishable content. It is not an idea of an object, “but merely [one] of the manner or order in which objects exist” (1740, pp. 39–40).

The idea of time is not deriv'd from a particular impression mix'd up with others, and plainly distinguishable from them; but arises altogether from the manner, in which impressions appear to the mind, without making one of the number. (1740, p. 36)

Thus, for Hume, time is atomistic, in the same manner as the succession of discrete contents: there are ‘indivisible moments’ in time (e.g. 1740, p. 39). Therefore there can be no real connection between the thoughts of the flow of consciousness, or, then, between moments of time. Perceptions are each self-sufficient entities, entirely independent of any other perception.16

But, James objects:

a) A succession of feelings is not the same thing as a feeling of succession. Indeed, a succession is not sufficient, because there must also be simultaneous knowledge of previous phases at later stages in order to know that a succession has taken place (1890, pp. 627–631).

b) To be a ‘memory’ of past phases, Hume claims, an idea must ‘resemble’ its original, while being of a lesser ‘vivacity’—but how can we identify this ‘resemblance’ across time? In order to be correlated, both parts must be known (Gurwitsch 1943, pp. 455–456).

c) For Hume, there is no experience of intrinsic connection between time-slices. We know only that another impression has succeeded a first—we do not experience the succession itself. Succession is merely inferred after the event (Gurwitsch 1943, pp. 456–457). This conflicts with our ‘life experience’ of consciousness, James asserts.

The Self

James’ account of the unity of consciousness has a well-known impact upon accounts of the self. For James, personal identity consists neither in an immutable, introspectible self (criticised by Hume as having no empirical warrant), nor merely a bundle of perceptions and ideas (attacked in turn by the Rationalists). Selves, rather, are constructed out of the phenomenological data of our continuity.17 There is no distinction between the thinker and the thought: we are, more or less, just the unbroken flow of our experiences.

Concluding Remarks

The precise philosophical content of the notion of the transitive parts turns out to be this: that certain moments in our stream of thought consist in rapid, imageless motion towards a substantive ‘conclusion,’ during which we do not hold up the feelings we experience before our attention to deliberately inspect

16 If a substance is “something which may exit by itself,” then they “are … substances, as far as this definition explains a substance” (1740, p. 233).

17 On this see for example Flanagan 1991, pp. 32–33; Cooper 1992; and Parfit 1979.
them. These feelings are ones of relation, in particular of various kinds of continuity and connection; and they reveal that relations are just as much a part of our ‘life-world’ as the objects they relate.

The philosophical importance of aspects of this doctrine is considerable: in particular, if true, it has significance for views on the ontology of relations, the ontology of thought, the practice of logic, and our sense of time. I have here merely indicated that some central planks of the transitive part doctrine do seem introspectively accurate: these are the direct apprehension of relations, a sense of movement through thought, and the existence of imageless elements in thought. Certain other elements seem less well demonstrated, I have hinted, in particular the existence of segments of purely imageless thought, and the identity relation between the structure of our experience and that of ‘external reality’ or of time.

References
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