The Strange Attraction of Sciousness:  
William James on Consciousness

William James’ account of consciousness has been quite influential in the back-rooms of the recent philosophical and scientific study of consciousness. Gerald Edelman, for example, credits James for pointing out that consciousness is a process and not a substance or thing. Daniel Dennett has cited James approvingly as suggesting a “purely functional” model of introspective consciousness, while Owen Flanagan parades James’ robust notion of a phenomenological stream of consciousness. Several of the papers in the proceedings of the first major interdisciplinary conference on consciousness (“Toward a Science of Consciousness,” at Tucson in 1994) take James’ doctrines as a central starting point. As work in the burgeoning field of ‘consciousness studies’ reaches fever pitch, James’ thoughts in this area have increased in importance and influence correspondingly.

Yet it is not at all clear just what James thought consciousness was—or even whether he thought it existed. He had a lot of things to say about consciousness, and it’s not so simple to pile those mental nuggets all together so that they fall into any consistent pattern. Consider the following two quotations:

The first and foremost concrete fact which everyone will affirm to belong to his inner experience is the fact that consciousness of some sort goes on.

I believe that consciousness (as it is commonly represented, either as an entity, or as pure activity, but in any case as being fluid, unextended, diaphanous, devoid of content of its own, but directly self-knowing—spiritual, in short), I believe, I say, that this sort of consciousness is pure fancy.

In fact, the situation is even worse than it appears here. At least James’ careful wording of these two aphorisms appears to preserve the distinction between consciousness of some sort (which does exist) and consciousness as commonly understood (which does not). But exactly how he can consistently draw the distinction between these two kinds of consciousness is not at all clear. The conceptual tangle is made more difficult by James’ habitual differentiation between his writings—and thus his conclusions—to do with natural science and those concerning metaphysics.

This difficulty has struck several commentators in the current consciousness debate, even those who consider themselves strongly influenced by his work. Thus, for example, Bernard Baars, a well-known cognitive scientist, notes in his book on consciousness that many have “found James to be a great source of confusion, for all his undoubted greatness, and James himself felt confused.” This view is also shared by a number of James scholars, such as Gerald E. Myers:

James wanted to hold that in one way consciousness does not exist, but that in another way it does; yet he was never able, even to his own satisfaction, to define the two ways clearly enough to show that they are consistent rather than contradictory.

So I want to do two things in this paper:

a) bring together in one place and briefly explain all the main things that James has to say about the existence of consciousness; and

b) show that all his positions can be seen as mutually consistent without, for example, relying on the assumption that some of his ‘naturally scientific’ methodological assumptions in fact turn out to be false within the final system as a whole.

It turns out, I will claim, that James’ theory of consciousness is even more unique and suggestive than has previously been realised. It encompasses gritty realism about the phenomenal data of consciousness, a
sort of dualism between the mental and the physical, his radical metaphysics of pure experience and, perhaps most interesting of all, a view of consciousness as a kind of control capacity without agency—a position that I think can fruitfully be compared with the role of attractors in chaotic systems.

In what follows I shall try to explicate James’ ideas in four parts:

1. First, his writings about the stream of thought, drawing a contrast between these and standard notions about consciousness, but noting his assertions to the effect that this phenomenon certainly does exist.
2. Then those parts of his writings which suggest that one of the things which is true about consciousness is that it is non-physical. That is ‘consciousness exists’ in the traditional sense that something inhabits the universe ‘in addition to’ the physical, and these extras correspond to what we normally label ‘the mental.’
3. Third, those segments of James’ thought which treat of consciousness as a causal agent, and which suggest consciousness exists not just as a melody or a shadow exist, but in a more substantial way.
4. And finally I will briefly discuss James’ metaphysical doctrine of ‘radical empiricism,’ which views consciousness as existing as an arrangement of pure experience.

By the time I am finished, I hope to have shown that all James’ manifold pronouncements in this area can be made consistent and coherent in an extremely interesting way.

1. The Stream of Thought

There are two fundamental points to hold in view here, I think. First, to put it at its simplest, James holds that states of consciousness exist, in the form of the ‘stream of thought,’ but calls into question the status of consciousness itself. Second, James asserts that psychology, as a natural science, must hold certain data to be fundamental; like every science it must rely upon certain assumptions which it cannot call into question on peril of ascending/descending into metaphysics. Among these basic postulates are the data of consciousness. Thus when we introspect and look into our own minds, “everyone agrees that we there discover states of consciousness.”

In accordance with this: “the definition of Psychology may be best given … as the description and explanation of states of consciousness as such.”

So James can be seen as having a strong positive thesis about the existence of consciousness: such things as sensations, desires, emotions, cognitions and the rest of the list—the standard furniture of our mental lives—positively do exist, and indeed are the very subject matter of the science of psychology. However, this is coupled with his, perhaps more famous and controversial, negative account of consciousness. All that James is willing to admit at the outset, by way of (so to speak) fleshing out the stream of consciousness, is that “thought goes on.” He then proceeds to outline more of its characteristics, and in particular:
- that every thought is part of a personal consciousness;
- that thought is in constant change;
- that within each personal consciousness thought is sensibly continuous;
- that thought appears to deal with objects independent of itself; and
- that thought is selectively attentive.

James goes further: he suggests that all that is evident about consciousness, as we actually experience it, amounts to nothing more than the sequence of thoughts with roughly the five kinds of property listed above. “When we turn to consciousness, to examine it in its own specific being, we find not an ‘entity’ distinct from its objects but just this cognitive function of having objects.”

This is, for James, not only compatible with a very attenuated metaphysical account of consciousness, but seems to demand it because of the absence of evidence for any other hypotheses.

I believe that ‘consciousness,’ when once it has evaporated to this estate of pure diaphaneity, … is on the point of disappearing altogether. It is the name of a nonentity.

Thus, for example, we do not experience consciousness as being a sort of container through which unchanging, simple ideas pass: it, itself, is the continuous stream of thought, and it is natively selective. Nor do we experience a soul or ego behind or within our consciousness. Nor do we have any direct
evidence, James asserts, that the medium of the stream of thought is a different kind of substance than the ‘rest’ of the world.\(^{18}\)

So James is opposed even to the neo-Kantians, who, though they reduce consciousness to merely a logical correlative of ‘content’—the consequence of the irreducible subject-plus-object character of experience—however also suppose that we “have an immediate consciousness of consciousness itself. … [T]he consciousness is believed to … be felt as a kind of impalpable inner flowing.”\(^{19}\)

Perhaps the most central part of all of this is that James claims we have no evidence for the duality of content and consciousness. The contemporary prevailing view, James says, was that experience is essentially dualistic, made up of both ‘content’ and ‘consciousness, or reference to a self,’ and it is possible to mentally subtract one, so that the other remains ‘in the mind’s eye.’\(^{20}\) Such a view is not unheard of today.

But

… experience, I believe, has no such inner duplicity; and the separation of it into consciousness and content comes, not by way of subtraction, but by way of addition—the addition, to a given concrete piece of it, of other sets of experiences. … [A] given undivided portion of experience, taken in one context of associates, play[s] the part of a knower, of a state of mind, of ‘consciousness’; while in a different context the same undivided bit of experience plays the part of a thing known, of an objective ‘content.’\(^{21}\)

This preserves a sort of dualism—“since it can figure in both groups simultaneously we have every right to speak of it as subjective and objective both at once,”\(^{22}\) but it is not any longer a mysterious dualism, James suggests.

[I]t becomes verifiable and concrete. It is an affair of relations, it falls outside, not inside, the single experience considered, and can always be particularized and defined.\(^{23}\)

James Edie calls this “James’ non-egological theory of consciousness.” Consciousness, according to James, is thus not another entity juxtaposed to the entities it knows, with an internal structure of its own, but is rather the ‘function’ of the objectification; its forms and structure come from its objects.\(^{24}\) And so:

It seems as if consciousness as an inner activity were rather a postulate than a sensibly given fact, the postulate, namely, of a knower as correlative to all this known; and as if ‘sciousness’ might be a better word by which to describe it. But ‘sciousness postulated as an hypothesis’ is practically a very different thing from ‘states of consciousness apprehended with infallible certainty by an inner sense.’\(^{25}\)

2. Non-Physical Consciousness

One might be tempted at this point to think that James is in some way bent on collapsing the mental into the physical; this, within the modern terms of this debate, perhaps seems to us a natural way of showing that ‘consciousness does not exist.’ However, though consciousness is clearly not for James a separate substance from the physical, nor is it to be identified with the physical.

Although we affirm that the coming to pass of thought is a consequence of mechanical laws … we do not in the least explain the nature of thought by affirming this dependence, and in that latter sense our proposition is not materialism.\(^{26}\)

In Human Immortality James describes what he calls “the great psycho-physiological formula: Thought is a function of the brain.”\(^{27}\) However, nowhere (as far as I know) does he seriously propose the prospect that thought is the same thing as the brain (in the commonsensical sense we would understand that phrase today—I am ignoring for the present his doctrine of pure experience but adopting his ‘methodological dualism’).\(^{28}\) “The admitted fact of functional dependence,”\(^{29}\) for James, is here a relation
between separate terms. Indeed, when James lists the possible varieties of functional dependence—productive, permissive or transmissive—none of them constitute self-identity.

Further, James lists many attributes of consciousness which he considers not to be predicable of the physical. For example, he dwells at some length on the fact that consciousness is unique in that it can have ‘ends’ or ‘interests.’ Considered merely physically, the reactions of our brain

… cannot be properly talked of as ‘useful’ or ‘hurtful’ at all. … All that can be said of them is that if they occur in a certain way survival will as a matter of fact be their incidental consequence. The organs themselves, and the rest of the physical world, will, however, all the time be quite indifferent to this consequence, and would quite as cheerfully, if the circumstances changed, compass the animal’s destruction. (141)

This has the additional consequence that the fundamental character of consciousness, for James, is as a ‘fighter for ends.’ It is not purely cognitive—rather, cognition is subservient to ends (141).

Other central examples of non-physical predicates, for James, are the property of ‘knowing’ or ‘reporting’ and of being ‘personal.’ In addition, all sorts of things are true of ‘mental objects’ (that fire may play over them and not affect them, that they only came into existence moments ago) that are false of their corresponding ‘physical’ counterparts, and vice versa.

3. Causal Consciousness

Another way of downplaying the ‘reality’ of consciousness is to strip it of its causal agency, a view which “banishes [consciousness] to a limbo of causal inertness” (135), where it exists more like a ‘melody,’ or a ‘shadow’ than like a ‘real thing’ (133). James remarks, however, that he finds this prospect unconvincing. “It is to my mind quite inconceivable that consciousness should have nothing to do with a business which it so faithfully attends” (136).

It may be that the causal relation between consciousness and the brain is wholly mysterious—even inconceivable, James notes. But, he argues, the same is true of every instance of causation, as Hume is supposed to have demonstrated. Psychology, as a natural science has a duty to be naïve about the status of causes—if something seems like a cause, then they had better treat it as if it is (137–8). In addition, “the particulars of the distribution of consciousness, so far as we know them, point to its being efficacious” (138).

i) “Consciousness grows the more complex and intense the higher we rise in the animal kingdom” (138).

ii) Consciousness might help “maintain the animal in the struggle for existence” (138).

iii) The defects of the ‘other’ human organs “are such as to make them need just the kind of help that consciousness would bring provided it were efficacious” (138).

iv) Therefore “the plausible inference [is] that it came just because of its efficacy” (138–9).

The higher nervous system—the cerebral hemispheres—is highly unstable, James asserts; its operations are “indeterminate and unforeseeable” compared to those of the brain stem (139). James, had he had the terminology, seems on the verge of calling the brain a chaotic system:

…what discharge a given small impression will produce may be called accidental, in the sense in which we say it is a matter of accident whether a rain-drop falling on a mountain ridge descend the eastern or western slope (139).

This provides for an extremely high capacity for adaptation to minute changes in circumstances (139). However, it also leads to the problem that “I do not see how one could reasonably expect from it any certain pursuance of useful lines of reaction” (140). It may be hugely adaptable, but “we can never be sure that its equilibrium will be upset in the appropriate direction” (140).

Consciousness, James claims, is “primarily a selecting agency” (139). Its role, always, is to attend to one thing in particular out of the range of things presented to its notice, and it does so in line with some particular interest. Consciousness, then, acts something like an attractor in a chaotic system “by bringing
a more or less constant pressure to bear in favour of those of its performances which make for the most permanent interests of the brain’s owner.” Consciousness is a non-physical causal force which stabilizes the brain.

There seems to be something deeply implausible about James’ Darwinian claims here. He claims that “the brain is an instrument of possibilities, but of no certainties,” and that the organ is just as apt to move in the direction of ends “which are not the proper ones of the animal, but often quite opposed,” as the reverse (141). But if the brain is a purely mechanical, deterministic system, then, for any given set of circumstances, it will have a given behavioural output. If that output is inappropriate, then it will lessen the organism’s chances of surviving and reproducing—natural selection should take care of the rest. So, if this is right, nothing in addition to the unconscious brain is needed.

However, James’ claims look more plausible once we understand him as claiming that the brain is a chaotic system; that is, in a nutshell, that the brain’s activities have a very great dependence on initial conditions, such that a miniscule change in conditions might lead to radically different outcomes; consider a pencil balancing on its point, or the ‘butterfly effect’ on weather systems. This general chaotic character would, as James says, vastly increase the brain’s responsiveness to its environment (by definition, in fact). However it would, as James notes, lead to the danger of the brain responding in widely different ways to two very similar situations, because of small differences in ‘irrelevant’ conditions: for example, faced with a sheer cliff, a chaotic organism might either jump or back away depending on, say, the prevailing wind-speed.

The solution is to introduce the notion of an attractor: a set of points to which the system is especially ‘attracted’ within the space of possible outputs. Thus chaotic systems are, in fact, to some degree predictable: they always end up at some point on the attractor. This is the role that consciousness plays.

However, if all of this is so, then consciousness need not be an external causal agent acting upon the brain—rather it is more like a principle of organisation of the brain: a higher level pattern which describes the complex activities of the brain.

4. Radical Empiricism

My thesis is that if we start with the supposition that there is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff ‘pure experience,’ then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter. The relation itself is a part of pure experience; one of its ‘terms’ becomes the subject or bearer of the knowledge, the knower, the other becomes the object known.

Thus James introduces his notion of ‘radical empiricism’—that the most fundamental ‘substance’ is not matter, nor mind, but pure experience. Thus consciousness qua substance-like entity, or qua something radically distinct from the physical, does not exist.

James’ evidence for this hypothesis seems to consist largely of an examination of consciousness as it is seen pre-theoretically. Here is his puzzle: We see a room, which commonsensically is a physical object in space, and which commonsensically we have ‘in our mind.’ How can the room be in two places at once: the world and the mind? It might be that what is in the mind is only a representation of the room; but ‘the reader’s sense of life’ knows no intervening image but seems to see the room immediately. His solution: “Reality is apperception itself. … Our sensations are not small inner duplications of things, they are the things themselves in so far as the things are presented to us.” The commonsensical solution to the problem, James thus urges, is to hold that the room exists in two places at once just as a single point can be on two lines at once: if it is at their intersection.

The two ‘lines’ or processes or sets of relations are:

a) the reader’s personal biography, a set of mental, ‘inner,’ operations.
b) the history of the house of which the room is part, a train of physical operations.
That these two groups of operations are “curiously incompatible” (as we saw in II above) is a matter of their differing contexts only, “just as the same material thing may be both low and high, or small and great, or bad and good, because of its relations to opposite parts of an environing world.”

So what kind of ‘stuff’ is pure experience—that is, what is consciousness fundamentally ‘made of’? There are as many stuffs as there are ‘natures’ in the things experienced. If you ask what any one bit of pure experience is made of, the answer is always the same: ‘It is made of that, of just what appears, of space, of intensity, of flatness, brownness, heaviness, or what not.’

At least three major questions about all this arise at once. First, why do the natures of things differ so much depending on whether they are taken as consciousness or content? Indeed, these two kinds of nature seem to contradict each other—one is heavy, the other not; one spatial, the other not—and yet they are supposed to be of the self-same thing. How can this be? Second, how can one bit of pure experience know another? How can a bit of pure experience ‘know’ anything? Yet there certainly seems to be knowing going on. And third, how can my point of view be accounted for? If ‘mind’ and ‘matter’ are fundamentally the same, and all the universe is pure experience, then what is it that traces ‘my’ passage through “the external world”? What is ‘the given’?

James does have responses to these problems, but sadly I do not have the space to consider them properly here. In brief: James’ response to the first is basically to claim that the ‘mental’ and ‘physical’ do not differ in their natures, but only in the relations of these characteristics.

The general group of experiences that act … comes inevitably to be contrasted with the group whose members, having identically the same natures, fail to manifest them in the ‘energetic’ way.

Thus, the thought of a fire is hot; the mental image of a foot-rule does have extension; it is just that the fire fails to warm my body, and the imagined foot-rule need not be in a stable ‘spatial’ relationship with other mental objects. “The two worlds differ, not by the presence of absence of extension, but by the relations of the extensions which in both worlds exist.”

On the second question, James has this to say:

What does exist and constitutes the portion of truth covered over by the word ‘Consciousness’ is the susceptibility possessed by the parts of experience to be reported or known. … This susceptibility is explained by the fact that certain experiences can lead some to others by means of distinctly characterized intermediary experiences, in such a fashion that some play the role of known things, others that of knowing subjects. … These two roles can be defined perfectly without departing from the web of experience itself, and without invoking anything transcendent. … The attributes ‘subject’ and ‘object,’ ‘represented’ and ‘representative,’ ‘thing’ and ‘thought’ mean, then, but a distinction which is of a functional order only, and not at all ontological as understood by classical dualism.

Either, then, something is an object present to perception, in which case it is simply the self-same piece of experience in its ‘known’ aspect, or our mental image of it is related in certain ways to other parts of pure experience, such as our being able to direct someone to the thing, knowing something about its background and present uses.

On the third point above, regarding our point of view, part of James’ response is to say that

… the world experienced (otherwise called the ‘field of consciousness’) comes at all times with our body as its centre, centre of vision, centre of action, centre of interest. Where the body is is ‘here’; when the body acts is ‘now’; what the body touches is ‘this’; all other things are ‘there’ and ‘then’ and ‘that.’

Bringing It All Together
As I have already noted, there seems to be much general dissatisfaction with the coherence of James’ various pronouncements about consciousness. With one breath, James is a dualist; with the next he is asserting a ‘radical empiricist’ form of monism. On one page he calls consciousness the fundamental datum of psychology, and an unshakeable reality of our everyday experience; overleaf he is busy trying to persuade us that consciousness does not exist. With one hand he gives us the causal efficacy of consciousness; with the other he takes it away as an agent or activity or entity.

W. E. Cooper takes the line that all apparent conflicts can be resolved by keeping clear James’ distinction between the level of ‘natural science’ and that of metaphysics. In general, he says, James can adopt the position that certain metaphysical positions are possibly true, and can argue about them in certain works, while still holding that the phenomena of a particular science can account for all relevant empirical aspects. For example, he says at one point, “our reasonings have not established the non-existence of the Soul; they have only proved its superfluity for scientific purposes.”

The relationship between these two levels, for James, is not exhaustively characterised by Cooper. However, there seem to be two ways of construing the relation. It could be that:

a) the assumptions of the science of psychology are false but instrumentally useful, or
b) the assumptions of the science of psychology are actually true, but only partial, restricted only to ‘unmetaphysical’ matters which are not controversial.

On the former reading, James can be inconsistent in what he says about consciousness: for some of the things he asserts, for example in the *Principles*, may be strictly speaking false. Cooper, at times, seems to tend towards this view. For example, he claims that James is an instrumentalist in science, which might be taken as symptomatic of a cavalier attitude towards truth. And it is true that James, for example, cheerfully admits that psychology’s assumption of determinism is likely to be false.

However, I do not think that we need to treat James this way; the second reading b) is also possible. John Danisi, for instance, suggests that James’ real intention in insisting on psychology’s status as a ‘natural science’ was to strip psychology of its dubious underpinnings and concentrate solely on the facts of experience. And I think we do have now before us an interpretation of James’ account of consciousness in which—though very far from unproblematic—each of the parts are mutually consistent, at least when broadly construed: his dualism is consistent with his monism; his anti-epiphenomenalism with his attacks on consciousness as a causal agent; his crypto-functionalism with his phenomenal realism. Here, then, is how all of what James says about consciousness can be true together:

1. All that our experienced mental life shows us is that thoughts follow each other in a stream with the five characteristics identified by James in *The Principles of Psychology*. This data is the subject of psychology; and, as far as it goes, it reveals truth—the stream of consciousness actually exists.
2. The dualism between the mental and the physical also exists; however, it is not a dualism of substance, it does not classify our ‘real’ ontology. It is a dualism of higher level patternings of the relations entered into by bits of pure experience. The mental and the physical are two quite different kinds of ‘process.’
3. Consciousness can be spoken of, if only rather metaphorically, as ‘causal.’ However, it is a mistake to think of it as an agency (and here, if anywhere, I am either stretching James too far or he is misleading). Rather the fact of consciousness in an organism should be thought of as the appearance of a kind of patterning within its behaviour, along the lines of the way an attractor ‘causes’ chaotic behaviour to follow a certain complex trajectory; and this patterning is, of course, highly causally relevant.
4. The fundamental metaphysical reality is pure experience: both the mental and the physical consist in ‘pieces’ of pure experience ‘seen’ in the context of different sets of relations.
NOTES

9. Just as “all the natural sciences, for example, in spite of the fact that farther reflection leads to Idealism, assume that a world of matter exists altogether independently of the perceiving mind.” *Psychology* p. 9.
10. William James, *The Principles of Psychology, Vol. 1*, New York: Dover 1918 [1890], p. 185. James continues: “So far as I know the existence of such states has never been doubted by any critic, however sceptical in other respects he may have been. … I regard this belief as the most fundamental of all the postulates in Psychology, and shall discard all curious enquiries about its certainty as too metaphysical for the cope of this book.” *Principles* p. 185.
11. “By states of consciousness are meant such things as sensations, desires, emotions, cognitions, reasonings, decisions, volitions, and the like.” *Psychology* p. 9.
12. *Principles* p. 225. Henceforth page references to this book will be included in the text.
13. See *Principles* Ch. IX.
14. *Psychology* gives a similar list of five properties.
18. For example: we think we perceive our mental life “as a sort of interior current—active, light, fluid, delicate, diaphanous, so to speak—and absolutely different from what is material. … I believe … that this sort of consciousness is pure fancy, and that the sum of concrete realities which the word consciousness should cover deserves quite a different description.” “The Notion of Consciousness,” pp. 2–7.
20. “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist,” p. 6. “…[I]t is always considered as possessing an essence absolutely distinct from the essence of material objects which, by a mysterious gift, it can represent and know. Taken in their materiality, material things are not felt, they are not objects of experience as such, nor are they related as such. In order that they may assume the form of the system in which we feel ourselves to be living, it is necessary that material things appear; and this fact of appearance, superadded to their raw existence, is called the consciousness we have of them…” “The Notion of Consciousness,” p. 1.

28. When he does, at one point, note the possibility, he (a little dismissively) calls it ‘the monistic theory,’ where mind and brain are ‘inner and outer aspects’ of ‘One and the Same Reality.’ After mentioning the theory, he then proceeds to discuss its two alternatives (‘the spiritualistic theory’ and ‘the atomistic theory’) in more detail, suggesting that these are the two really live options. *Psychology*, p. 396.


31. “Nothing can more strikingly show, it seems to me, the essential difference between the point of view of consciousness and that of outward existence. We can describe the latter only in teleological terms, hypothetically, or else by the addition of a supposed contemplating mind which measures what it sees going on by its private teleological standard, and judges it intelligent. But consciousness itself is not merely intelligent in this sense. It is intelligent intelligence. It seems both to supply the means and the standard by which they are measured. It not only serves a final purpose, but brings a final purpose—posits, declares it.” “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence” in *Essays in Philosophy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978 [1878], pp. 27–28.


33. The contrast with a ‘real thing’ here is mine rather than James’.

34. *Principles*, p. 140. For example, pleasures are generally associated with beneficial acts, and pains with harmful ones. A good reason for this would be if mental states were causally efficacious: then, if harmful acts were pleasurable, organisms would be made to pursue them and thus come to harm. “An animal that should take pleasure in a feeling of suffocation would, if that pleasure were efficacious enough to make him immerse his head in water, enjoy a longevity of four or five minutes.” *Principles*, pp. 143–4.


36. On all of this see, for example, James Gleick, *Chaos*, New York: Viking, 1987.

37. Note too, if you like, that Jeff Goldblum’s chaos mathematician character in the film *Jurassic Park* illustrates the phenomenon of chaos by showing that a drop of water, landing in the same place, will run in a different direction off someone’s hand each time because of tiny variances in initial conditions. Compare James’ rainfall on a mountain ridge example!


39. “Let the case be what it may in others, I am as confident as I am of anything that, in myself, the stream of thinking (which I recognize emphatically as a phenomenon) is only a careless name for what, when scrutinized, reveals itself to consist chiefly in the stream of my breathing. ... The entity is fictitious, while thoughts in the concrete are fully real. But thoughts in the concrete are made of the same stuff as things are.” “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist,” p. 19.


41. “The Notion of Consciousness,” p. 3. “This present actuality with which things confront us, from which all our theoretical constructions are derived and to which they must return ... is homogenous—nay, more than homogenous, but numerically one—with a certain part of our inner life.” “The Notion of Consciousness,” p. 3.

42. “If the ‘pure experience’ of the room were a place of intersection of two processes, which connected it with different groups of associates respectively, it would be counted twice over, as belonging to either group. ... In one of these contexts it is your ‘field of consciousness’; in another it is ‘the room in which you sit,’ and it enters both contexts in its wholeness, giving no pretext for being said to attach itself to consciousness by one of its parts or aspects, and to outer reality by another.” “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist,” p. 8. The same rule applies for concepts or imaginings (as opposed to percepts). Imaginings or memories for example, can be seen to have a dual objective-subjective nature. There is the context of the inner history of a person, and there is the context of all the impersonal associations and relations—spatial, temporal, logical etc.—between the experiences. That is, in one context these experiences form part of the ‘field of objects,’ and in another they are ‘states of mind.’ (See “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist,” pp. 9–10.) Our concepts and imaginings are ‘objective phenomena’: a dream of a golden mountain appears to the dreamer as physical; remembrance of ones childhood in a far-off land is presented as about a part of the world, truly distant in time and space. (“The Notion of Consciousness,” pp. 3–4.)
43. “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist,” p. 13. The difference between things perceived and things imagined is not a difference in kind: “It is simply that a present object has a vivacity and a clearness superior to those of the representation. ... But this present object, what is it in itself? Of what stuff is it made? Of the same stuff as the representation. It is made of sensations; it is something perceived.” “The Notion of Consciousness,” p. 4.


48. But, James goes on to explain, everything in our mental life contains reference to some ‘other.’ Sensational experiences are their ‘own others,’ then, both internally and externally. Inwardly they are one with their parts, and outwardly they pass continuously into their neighbors, so that events separated by years of time in a man’s life hang together unbrokenly by the intermediary events.” “The Continuity of Experience,” in McDermott, p. 295. Yet is every kind of connectedness to constitute intentionality? Part of a table-top forms a continuum with the rest; it can lead one to another point on the table. This does not mean it ‘knows’ it: here is a serious problem that James does not adequately address.


50. Consider, for example, Myers’ final verdict: “Whether the phenomenon is called experience or consciousness, James’ testimonial words to it lead us irresistibly to view it not merely as a function but as something with an inherent nature, by which it is a causal agent that produces effects. ... James wanted to hold that in one way consciousness does not exist, but that in another way it does; yet he was never able, even to his own satisfaction, to define the two ways clearly enough to show that they are consistent rather than contradictory.” Myers, p. 64.


52. Principles p. 350, quoted in Cooper 1992. “At the scientific level of James’ system a proposition is expected to pay its way in the coin of prediction, verification and control, and, judged by this standard, references to the soul lack explanatory value. At the metaphysical level a proposition’s function is to make as much sense as possible of one’s experience and the human condition generally.” Cooper 1992, p. 508.

53. He suggests that “the natural sciences do the indispensable spadework for metaphysics, and they may point suggestively away from or towards a metaphysical conclusion; but typically they leave options open with respect to ultimate questions.” Cooper 1990, p. 574.

54. “The kind of psychology which could cure a case of melancholy, or charm a chronic insane delusion away, ought certainly be preferred to the most seraphic insight into the nature of the soul.” Essays in Psychology, p. 277, quoted in Cooper 1990, p. 584.


56. Cooper, too, sometimes seems to sway in this direction. “The pure experiences of the Essays are what the sensations of the Principles become when sensations are no longer being classified as mental or physical. This classification is still legitimate; it is salient for ordinary life and fundamental for scientific psychology. But for metaphysical purposes it is superficial.” Cooper 1990, p. 584.

57. “Instead of starting with some a priori scheme of entities, psychology must turn, as he says, to what can be immediately verified by everyone’s consciousness so that a central mass of experience can be described, which all may accept as certain, however different their ulterior philosophic interpretations of it may be.” John Danisi, “The Vanishing Consciousness of William James,” International Philosophical Quarterly 29:1 (1989), pp. 3–16, p. 8.