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# The Death of Consciousness? James's Case against Psychological Unobservables

ALEXANDER KLEIN\*

**ABSTRACT** Received wisdom has it that psychologists and philosophers came to mistrust consciousness for largely behaviorist reasons. But by the time John Watson had published his behaviorist manifesto in 1913, a wider revolt against consciousness was already underway. I focus on William James, an earlier influential source of unease about consciousness. James's mistrust of consciousness grew out of his critique of perceptual elementarism in psychology. This is the view that most mental states are complex, and that psychology's goal is in some sense to analyze these states into their atomic "elements." Just as we cannot (according to James) isolate any atomic, sensory elements in our occurrent mental states, so we cannot distinguish any elemental consciousness from any separate contents. His critique of elementarism depended on an argument against appeals in psychology to unconscious mentality—to unobservables. Perhaps this is ironic, but his thought is that pure consciousness is itself just as invisible to introspection as isolated, simple ideas.

**KEYWORDS** William James, *Principles of Psychology*, consciousness, unconsciousness, unobservables, elementarism, behaviorism, G. E. Moore, Sigmund Freud, Pierre Janet

*Ame, vie, souffle, qui saurait bien les distinguer exactement?* (William James, *ERE* 112)

## I. INTRODUCTION

LIKE HEARTBURN, A PRONOUNCED DISCOMFORT with the very idea of consciousness followed the early days of experimental psychology. Received wisdom has it that psychologists (and allied philosophers) came to mistrust consciousness for largely behaviorist reasons—they are supposed to have worried about the alleged impossibility of performing quantifiable, repeatable measurements on

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<sup>1</sup>"Soul, life, breath: really, who can distinguish between these exactly?" (*La Notion de Conscience*," my translation. James originally published "*La Notion de Conscience*" in French.)

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an essentially *private* phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> But this is a historical distortion, one that obscures some interesting and earlier philosophical concerns about the scientific study of consciousness.

Behaviorists rejected the scientific respectability of consciousness, to be sure. But by the time John Watson had published his 1913 manifesto,<sup>3</sup> a wider revolt against consciousness was already underway. By then, a host of psychologists and philosophers outside the behaviorist program had already come to reject consciousness talk as riddled with conceptual obscurity. More boldly, some had seemingly rejected the very existence of consciousness altogether. Thus, by the time behaviorists began *their* assault, consciousness already had one foot in its intellectual grave.

The received history is not innocuous, since a philosophical assumption rides along with the story that it was behaviorists who swept consciousness from psychology. The assumption is that the central impediment to the *recrudescence* of consciousness is privacy.<sup>4</sup> If we could only show how to employ first-person data in an objective science, today's self-styled consciousness scientists claim, we would overcome perhaps the tallest obstacle to a genuinely scientific explanation of this recalcitrant but central aspect of mind.<sup>5</sup>

I think a more accurate *fin-de-siècle* history suggests that there are some other obstacles to a science of consciousness than those that have lately been the focus of concern. As such, this essay explores some slings and arrows consciousness suffered during the so-called "introspectionist" era of psychology.

I begin with a general review of late-Victorian angst about consciousness. Then I delve into the case of William James. He is remembered as an icon of "introspectionism."<sup>6</sup> But he came to reject the existence of consciousness (as it had traditionally been understood). Unlike later behaviorists, though, his worries had little to do with the alleged impossibility of giving a scientific explanation of a private phenomenon. Indeed, that would have been an odd concern in the context of nineteenth-century achievements in quantificational psychophysics by the likes of Ernst Weber, Gustav Fechner, Hermann von Helmholtz, Wilhelm Wundt, and many others.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>E.g. Michel Ferrari and Adrien Pinard, "Death and Resurrection"; and Steven Hayes, Kelly Wilson, and Elizabeth Gifford, "Consciousness and Private Events," 153–54.

<sup>3</sup>John Watson, "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It."

<sup>4</sup>Aspects of this story can be found in Chris Frith and Geraint Rees, "Brief History," 11–19; James Bissett Pratt, "Behaviorism and Consciousness," 596; André Kukla, "Toward a Science of Experience," 231–32; Max Velmans, "An Epistemology for the Study of Consciousness," 711–12; Ferrari and Pinard, "Death and Resurrection"; and Hayes, Wilson, and Gifford, "Consciousness and Private Events," 153–54.

<sup>5</sup>E.g. David Chalmers, "How Can We Construct a Science of Consciousness?," 1117.

<sup>6</sup>I use scare quotes around "introspectionism" because I largely agree with concerns laid out in Alan Costall, "Introspectionism," about the very idea of an introspectionist tradition. A key text that helped enshrine James as an icon of so-called "introspectionism" is Watson, *Behaviorism*, 3.

<sup>7</sup>James was famously dubious about German psychophysics, saying that these methods "could hardly have arisen in a country whose natives could be *bored*" (*PP* 192). But witticisms aside, his complaint was not that they failed to achieve their goal of precise, quantified measurements of private phenomena, but that their results were too quickly given a "metaphysical" interpretation about the underlying, allegedly molecular structure of conscious experience. See James's discussion of Fechner's interpretation of Weber's law at *PP* 503–18.

The seeds of James's worries about consciousness (as traditionally construed) are found in his critique of what I will call 'elementarism' in psychology. This is the view that many perceptual states are complex, and that psychology's goal is to *analyze* these states into their atomic "elements." This approach was at the heart of the psychology that emanated from Wundt's lab in Leipzig eventually to E. B. Titchener's work at Cornell and Oswald Külpe's at Würzburg,<sup>8</sup> and it has roots that run at least as deep as George Berkeley and David Hume. Elementarism came in for intense criticism in James's *Principles of Psychology*, and his later revisionary account of consciousness extended the earlier critique, I will argue.

What has consciousness to do with elementarism about perception? James thought consciousness was typically construed as a constituent part of a complex mental state, as a kind of mental container that can be introspectively distinguished from some mental content it somehow envelops. But just as we cannot (according to James) isolate any atomic, *sensory* elements in our occurrent perceptual states, so we cannot distinguish any elemental *consciousness* from any separate *contents*.

As a historical matter, James can be said to have succeeded richly in sowing seeds of doubt among his peers.<sup>9</sup> Thus, consciousness began its downward slide not only because of classically behaviorist worries about whether we can objectively study private phenomena. There was an earlier problem—a creeping suspicion that there was no distinct entity (even in the loosest sense of the word "entity") *there* to study at all.

James's attack on elementarism turned on his argument against the existence of unconscious mentality. The elementarists' simple ideas are not directly available to introspection, so they must be unconscious mental entities if they exist at all. For reasons that I will examine, James held that unconscious mentality should not

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<sup>8</sup>The standard anecdote about the collapse of pre-behaviorist psychology involves exasperation over a dispute between Titchener and Külpe on the number of elementary sensations discoverable through controlled introspection. Titchener claimed to find "more than 44,435" such elements, while Külpe insisted there were fewer than 12,000. Behaviorists were pessimistic that such conflicting claims about consciousness could find objective resolution even in principle. This anecdote was popularized by Edwin Boring, *Sensation and Perception*, 10, and has been repeated more recently in Antti Revonsuo, *Consciousness: The Science of Subjectivity*, 53; Noa Latham, "Chalmers on Consciousness," 78; and Max Velmans, *Understanding Consciousness*, 58.

<sup>9</sup>A three-volume collection of so-called "American Realism" (Cornelis De Waal, *American New Realism, 1910-1920*) amply illustrates the impact of James's thinking on that once-influential (if now forgotten) movement, at the heart of which was the denial of a traditional, container/content account of consciousness. When it comes to his own eventual denial of a container/content account of consciousness, Bertrand Russell acknowledges his debt to both "William James and the American New Realists" (*The Analysis of Mind*, 9); on James and Russell, see Hatfield, "Sense-Data and the Philosophy of Mind"; Klein, "Russell on Acquaintance with Spatial Properties"; and Erik Banks, *Realistic Empiricism*. And in fact, James's attack on consciousness apparently influenced behaviorist thinking on the topic directly, for instance in the work of E. A. Singer (whom I discuss below) and Edward C. Tolman, who derived his own brand of neutral monism from James's student, the American Realist Edwin Holt; see Laurence D. Smith, *Behaviorism and Logical Positivism*, 113. Of course in saying Tolman advocated a brand of neutral monism, I am not saying he eliminated consciousness altogether. As an anonymous referee emphasizes to me, Tolman seems to admit that consciousness (in some sense of the word) exists; he just thinks it cannot be the subject of scientific inquiry. See Tolman, *Purposive Behavior in Animals and Men*, 215.

be permitted in a genuinely scientific study of the mind,<sup>10</sup> and that elementarism is therefore unscientific. Perhaps it is ironic that an opponent of unconscious mentality like James came to reject the existence of consciousness (as it had traditionally been construed) as well. But his thought is that pure consciousness is itself just as invisible to introspection as isolated, simple ideas.

The view James came around to was not eliminativism or reductionism, but a kind of pluralism according to which there is no one phenomenal property, and no definable list of such properties, shared by all conscious states as such. Instead, he claimed that we group phenomenally diverse states together under the concept of “consciousness” in virtue of a “function” they all share. He called this function “knowing.”

## 2. FIN-DE-SIÈCLE CONSCIOUSNESS

The world’s first psychological laboratories appeared in 1875 (at Harvard and at the University of Leipzig, independently).<sup>11</sup> Although consciousness clearly played a central role in the new, experimental science of mind, within thirty years widespread discomfort emerged among many psychologists and empirically-minded philosophers about the concept of consciousness.

To take one colorful example, the philosopher Ralph Barton Perry wrote in 1904:

Were the use of the term consciousness to be forbidden for a season, contemporary thought would be set the wholesome task of discovering more definite terms with which to replace it, and a very considerable amount of convenient mystery would be dissipated. There is no philosophical term at once so popular and so devoid of standard meaning.<sup>12</sup>

Perry was hardly alone in his mistrust of the term. In his influential “Psychology” entry for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, James Ward called “Consciousness . . . the vaguest, most protean and treacherous of psychological terms.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>James’s rejection of unconscious mentality is particularly relevant to the potted history often evoked by today’s consciousness scientists (see above, n. 4). Classical introspectionists are supposed to have been *right* to have seen consciousness as the ultimate *explanandum* of psychology, but wrong to have prohibited unconscious states (or “unobservables” as they are now styled) from psychology’s *explanans*. In fact, the introspectionist ban on unobservables is sometimes treated as the very reason that supposed movement failed. For instance, Bernard Baars characterizes contemporary consciousness research as introspectionism *plus* a newfound respect for unobservables, and the unobservables come in the form of unconscious mentality. He cites James as a pre-behaviorist who was mistaken in not permitting unconscious mental phenomena (Baars, *A Cognitive Theory of Consciousness*, 9–10). Here the potted history issues in another substantive assumption: allow unobservable entities in psychology, the thinking goes, and the science of consciousness can be rehabilitated. This assumption does not take James’s arguments against unconscious mentality into account.

<sup>11</sup>On William James’s laboratory at Harvard, see Robert S. Harper, “The Laboratory of William James.” On that laboratory vis-à-vis Wundt’s in Leipzig—Wundt is typically but erroneously cited as having founded the world’s first experimental psychology laboratory in 1879, when in fact he and James both had laboratories operating several years earlier—see Robert S. Harper, “The First Psychological Laboratory.”

<sup>12</sup>Ralph Barton Perry, “Conceptions and Misconceptions of Consciousness,” 282.

<sup>13</sup>Ward’s original version of the article appeared in 1886, but this exasperated passage does not appear until he revised the article for the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in 1911; see James Ward, “Psychology,” 554.

Even psychologists who most forcefully advocated the importance of introspection for the young science of mind—people like Titchener<sup>14</sup>—began distancing themselves from the term. Here is Titchener in the introduction to his 1915 *Beginner's Psychology*:

I have avoided the term 'consciousness.' Experimental psychology made a serious effort to give it a scientific meaning; but the attempt has failed; the word is too slippery, and so is better discarded. The term 'introspection' is, I have no doubt, travelling the same road; and I could easily have avoided it, too; but the time is, perhaps, not quite ripe.<sup>15</sup>

Maybe the most intriguing case of disgruntlement about consciousness is William James. He did not merely advocate avoiding the word 'consciousness' on grounds of supposed terminological ambiguity. By 1904, he was claiming that the word 'consciousness' names an entity that *does not exist*:

I believe that 'consciousness' . . . is the name of a nonentity, and has no right to a place among first principles. Those who still cling to it are clinging to a mere echo, the faint rumor left behind by the disappearing 'soul' upon the air of philosophy. (*ERE* 3–4)

What accounts for the apparently widespread anxiety about consciousness, particularly among psychologists and empirically-minded philosophers, at the turn of the century?

It cannot simply be that earlier, careless usage was catching up with them. Bain had distinguished 13 different senses of the word as early as 1859, and yet he long considered consciousness "the leading term of Mental Science."<sup>16</sup> In fact, James himself had relied on the term once upon a time. His 1890 *Principles* offered both an operationalized account (consciousness is present when we find actions "performed *for the sake* of their result," [*PP* 21]) as well as experiment-driven hypotheses about which physiological processes produce genuine consciousness. And he defended the causal efficacy of consciousness against epiphenomenalists like Huxley and Clifford, along the way offering an evolutionary hypothesis about consciousness's adaptive function.<sup>17</sup> Surely consciousness's (eventual) bad reputation is not due simply to a lack of care taken with this term in earlier work.

One might be tempted to dismiss some of the *fin-de-siècle* agitation about consciousness as mere metaphysical speculation rather than actual scientific doubt. But one cannot help but notice that among those who came to have misgivings about consciousness were some of the very psychologists (such as James and Titchener) who had once portrayed this concept as central to the scientific study of mind. What is more, they did so precisely in the name of advancing the project of a scientific psychology. In fact, Bertrand Russell—perhaps the most famous (eventual) advocate of James's later, functional treatment of consciousness—also rejected a more traditional account in hopes of gaining a better grip on the

<sup>14</sup>E.g. Titchener, *An Outline of Psychology*, 4, and *Experimental Psychology*, I.2.xxii.

<sup>15</sup>Titchener, *A Beginner's Psychology*, x.

<sup>16</sup>Alexander Bain, *Mental Science*, 93. The thirteen senses of "consciousness" can be found at Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, 599–605. Another careful consideration of just how to define consciousness is William Davidson, "Definition of Consciousness."

<sup>17</sup>*PP* ch. 4; Klein, "James and Consciousness" and "William James's Objection to Epiphenomenalism."

relationship between physics and the science of psychology.<sup>18</sup> And Ernst Mach advocated a similarly functional account of consciousness for related reasons.<sup>19</sup> So it seems that early on, the practical concerns of building a genuine science of mind were intertwined with concerns about how and whether we can grasp the mysterious phenomenon of consciousness—the issue was not merely confined to the speculative metaphysics of mind.

As a preliminary to unpacking James's worries about consciousness, I now turn to a brief history of elementarism.

### 3. ELEMENTARISM, AND JAMES'S ALTERNATIVE

In the *Principles*, James often divided his opponents into two opposed groups. Associationists—he cited Johann Friedrich Herbart, Hume, the Mills, and Bain as leaders—believed they could explain our “chaotic” mental phenomena as an “arrangement of . . . elements, as one explains houses by stones and bricks” (*PP* 15). Spiritualists—James had in mind neo-Kantian and -Hegelian idealists like Josiah Royce, Edward Caird, and especially T. H. Green<sup>20</sup>—point out that a collection of experienced elements is not the same as an experience of a collection: “a bundle of separate ideas would never form one thought at all, and they [spiritualists] contend that an Ego must be added to the bundle to give it unity, and bring the various ideas into relation with each other” (*PP* 267).

In one sense, James sided with the spiritualists. *If* momentary experiences could consist of collections of discrete impressions, sensations, ideas, or what have you, then one would need some synthesizing entity to bring all these discrete items into a unified conscious experience (*PP* 163).<sup>21</sup> But in a deeper sense, James departed from both associationists *and* spiritualists, for he denied that momentary experiences really *are* made up of simple elements. He wrote that both associationists and spiritualists:

agree that the elements of the subjective stream are discrete and separate and constitute what Kant calls a ‘manifold.’ But while the associationists think that a ‘manifold’ can form a single knowledge, the egoists deny this, and say that the knowledge comes only when the manifold is subjected to the synthetizing activity of an ego. Both make an identical initial hypothesis; but the egoist, finding it won't express the facts, adds another hypothesis to correct it. . . . [*But t*]here is no manifold of coexisting ideas. (*PP* 267–68)

<sup>18</sup>Russell, *The Analysis of Mind*, 5–6, 40, 307–8; and Klein, “Russell on Acquaintance with Spatial Properties.”

<sup>19</sup>Banks, *Realistic Empiricism*, 9–10. Also see Edgar A. Singer, Jr., “Mind as an Observable Object,” and Tolman, *Purposive Behavior in Animals and Men*, 215, for the claim that consciousness is not a suitable object of scientific study.

<sup>20</sup>James wrote that “spiritualists” defend the existence of a human soul (*PP* 15), but not everybody who accepted souls would have counted as “spiritualists” in his sense. For James characterized spiritualists as “the enemies of psychology” (*PP* 267), and hence he must have had in view the neo-Kantians and -Hegelians mentioned in the text, not psychologists like Ladd and Fullerton who accepted souls. For more on idealist opposition to psychology, see Klein, “*Divide et Impera!*” and “Hume, Green, James.”

<sup>21</sup>James used an analogy to frame the spiritualists' point that mental entities cannot self-compound. Suppose one tells each of a dozen people one word from a 12-word sentence. Bunch the people together any way one pleases, and an awareness of the whole sentence will not be forthcoming. Just as the word-experiences do not bundle themselves into an awareness of a whole sentence, James held that simple ideas or impressions could not (were they to exist) bundle themselves into a complex idea or impression (*PP* 163).

A central burden of the *Principles* was to show that there are no complex mental states in the sense of states made up of discrete elements. James granted that observers can describe mental states *as though* they have parts, much like we can think of a soap bubble as being “composed” of spherical triangles. But the triangles do not play the role of building blocks—touch the bubble, and the triangles cannot be reassembled. Similarly, James argued, there are no experiential building blocks. Like bubbles, mental states are inviolable unities (PP 268n36).

I can attend to a single *aspect* of a unified mental state—such as the redness of this apple I see on the table. But that feeling is not like a stone that is salvaged from a demolished wall and later used to build a farmhouse. The feeling of redness cannot be removed from my current perception of the apple and then somehow inserted into a different perception, say of a red curtain.

What I am calling ‘elementarism’—the view “*that our mental states are composite in structure, made up of smaller states conjoined*” (PP 148)—comes in for a galaxy of criticisms throughout the *Principles*.<sup>22</sup> It is fair to regard the refutation of elementarism as one of that book’s overarching goals.

Elementarism was not an organized school of thought, but rather a general approach to perception that had, to be more precise now, two chief components. First, elementarists distinguish between raw *sensations*—these are representationally impoverished mental states (or mental-state parts) that are direct causal products of brain states—and full-blown *perceptions*, which are rich representations produced through some variety of mental manipulation of raw sensations.<sup>23</sup> On this sort of approach, perception is understood as a *two-step* process, with the manipulation of sensations into perceptions typically being construed as involving an intellectual act, such as unconscious inference.<sup>24</sup>

One important example of such an account of visual perception comes from Helmholtz, who held that our perception of depth, for example, is the result of an unconscious inference. The minor premise of such an inference consists of the sensation corresponding to the flat array of light-points projected on the retina at a given moment, and the major premise consists of an inductively-supported rule concerning the usual position of objects in the physical environment that typically produce the sensation in question. The perception—say, of a lamppost standing off to my right—is the result of an inference performed unconsciously on these psychological “premises.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Boring called this movement “elementism,” and he offered helpful overviews in Boring, *A History of Experimental Psychology*, ch. 18; cf. Boring, *Sensation and Perception*, ch. 1.

<sup>23</sup>E.g. Wundt, *Outlines of Psychology*, §6.2.

<sup>24</sup>Associationists and many others in the English-speaking world resisted the notion that this mental transformation is an *intellectual* act, often (following Berkeley) portraying it as one sensation causing the occurrence of another that has habitually or instinctively been associated with the first (e.g. Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind*, 371). But in the German-speaking world, Wundt’s view was more common, where the shift from sensation to perception was understood as the result of “logical processes” (*Beiträge zur Theorie der Sinneswahrnehmung*, 446; quoted in translation in Hatfield, *The Natural and the Normative*, 282–83). Although Wundt intended perceptions (and sometimes sensations) to be conscious mental states, he understood inferential transformations between the two to be unconscious.

<sup>25</sup>Helmholtz offered an influential criterion for disentangling the sensory core of an occurrent mental state from perceptual aspects that are the result of association or unconscious inference. He



James was critical of this traditional distinction between sensation and perception. He was also critical of a second feature of elementarism. Many nineteenth-century philosophers and psychologists inherited from their eighteenth-century counterparts a corpuscularian conception of raw sensation. In his 1709 *Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*, Berkeley had written, “There is a *Minimum Tangibile* and a *Minimum Visibile*, beyond which sense cannot perceive. This everyone’s experience will inform him.” (§54). Each point on the retina is supposed to correspond to one *minimum visibile*, such that the field of our visual sensations is like a pointillist painting composed of colored points—and the tactile sensory field is similarly conceived as a system of cutaneous pinpricks.

In the English-speaking world, this sort of corpuscularianism got carried into the nineteenth century by associationists like Hume, Hartley, and the Mills.<sup>26</sup> In the German-speaking lands, Kant’s talk of a sensory “manifold” needing to be “synthesized” into “images of objects” was pushed into a conception of sensations as punctiform by some of his more psychologically-minded successors.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the key early figure here is Johann Friedrich Herbart, who James cited as an exemplar of associationism (*PP* 15).<sup>28</sup>

To introduce James’s case against elementarism, it helps to consider a simple experimental phenomenon that became a guiding illustration of that view. In his revered *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music*, Helmholtz had reported that when discrete tone-pulses are repeated more quickly than about 110 beats per second, subjects actually hear a continuous sound.<sup>29</sup> Extrapolating from this result, admirers like Herbert Spencer then contended that our auditory perceptions themselves—not just the physical sound signals—are literally composed of discrete, sensory sound-atoms.<sup>30</sup> What is more, Spencer

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wrote that “nothing in our sense-perceptions can be recognized as sensation which can be overcome in the perceptual image and converted into its opposite by factors that are demonstrably due to experience” (*Treatise on Physiological Optics*, vol. 3, sect. 26, 13). For instance, that men can learn to adjust their perception of *orientation* when they learn to shave in a mirror shows, thinks Helmholtz, that our perception of orientation is perceptual, and not sensory. James hotly disputed this supposed criterion, offering a myriad of phenomena *typically* taken to be sensory that *do* seem to be susceptible to the educating effects of experience (*PP* chs. 17 and 20).

<sup>26</sup>Hume echoed Berkeley’s account of *minima sensibilia* (at *T* Book I, Part 2, Section i). James offered direct experimental evidence that there are no *minima sensibilia* in the context of his detailed account of spatial perception; see Klein, “Hume, Green, James.”

<sup>27</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 120–21. For a discussion of this passage, see Hatfield, *The Natural and the Normative*, 103.

<sup>28</sup>Hatfield, *The Natural and the Normative*, 120–22, and Timothy Lenoir, “Operationalizing Kant,” 154–56, acknowledge affinities between Herbart and the associationist school in Britain, though Hatfield sees these affinities as somewhat limited.

<sup>29</sup>Helmholtz, *On the Sensations of Tone*, 178.

<sup>30</sup>Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology*, §60; cited at *PP* 154. Helmholtz sought to explain musical audition in terms of “analytical perception”—the sensory analysis of complex tones into their simple constituents (*On the Sensations of Tone*, 62–65). He was quite clear that even when we are not aware of the simple tonal constituents in a complex tone, the simple tones nevertheless have an “existence in our sensation” (*On the Sensations of Tone*, 65). Contra Spencer, though, Helmholtz defines a simple tone in terms of the fundamental frequency of the complex sound wave we hear (*On the Sensations of Tone*, 23–24), not in terms of the discrete pulses in the cases in which Spencer was interested. Also, note that Spencer erroneously cited a rate of 16 pulses-per-second (not Helmholtz’s actual 110) to create the experience of a continuous tone.

thought Helmholtz's results suggested that just as we could (allegedly) reduce all continuous auditory perception to sonic atoms, and all continuous visual perceptions to minimal colored points, so we should try to find one common atom of consciousness underlying *all* different sense-modalities. These most fundamental minima he called "nervous shocks," proposing that they appear to subjects as sounds or sights (or whatever) depending on how they are arranged.<sup>31</sup>

James pointed out that the tone-pulse results could be interpreted in two ways. The figure on the left ("figure 1") represents Spencer's interpretation, and the other ("figure 2") represents James's alternative (*PP* 157, 159):

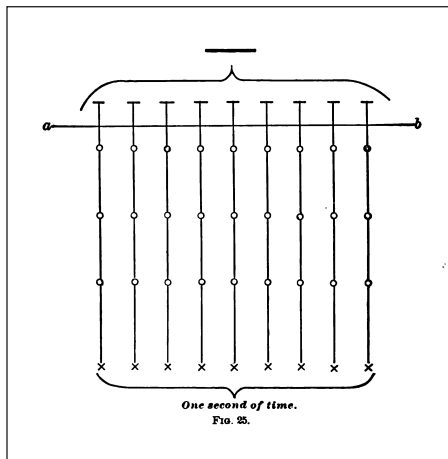


Figure 1.

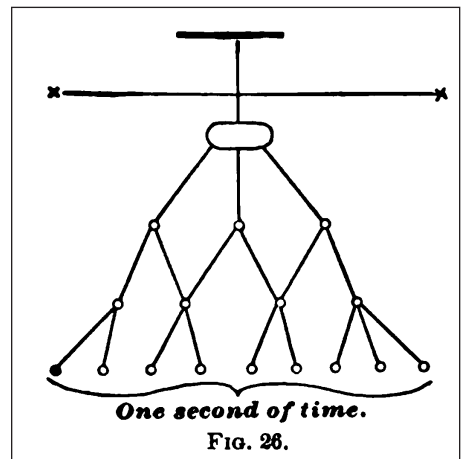


Figure 2.

The threshold of mentality is marked by the line *a-b*,<sup>32</sup> so that everything below the line is a physical process. Both figures show the tone pulses (at the bottom) producing discrete neural impulses that get synthesized into the perception of a continuous tone (at the top). The Spencer picture has the synthesis occurring above *a-b*—that is, in the *mental* sphere. The James picture treats the synthesis as a *physical* phenomenon, something occurring in the brain. For James, there are no discrete sensory units, and no synthesizing processes, *inside the sphere of the mental*. Instead, there are discrete, physical stimuli that get combined in the brain. The synthesized, continuous stimulus then directly gives rise to the perception of a continuous tone.

James's diagram gives us a *non-elementarist* model of synthesized tone-pulse perception. There is no half-blooded, "raw" sensory stage of experience that somehow gets mentally converted into full-blooded perceptions, for James. When it comes to the mental sphere, there are full-blooded perceptions *only*. One can

<sup>31</sup>See Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology*, I.150–51, a passage that James quoted at (*PP* 155–56).

<sup>32</sup>James actually says the line represents "the threshold of consciousness" in figure 25 (*PP* 157), but this cannot be right. The whole point of his discussion is to show that Spencer and Helmholtz's views both require a psychological synthesis of discrete entities of which we are *unconscious*, yet that are to count as mental.

think of this approach as a one-step model. Thus, the Jamesian psychologist's task starts with describing experiences exactly as they appear. The next task is not to "analyze" or "decompose" those experiences into supposedly simple mental elements, but rather to *correlate* those full-blooded perceptions with physiological states, directly (*PP* 6, 654n4, 677).

So what is wrong with elementarism, exactly? I now turn to James's argument that no mental state can have raw *sensations* as elementary parts. I will then look at his later suggestion that no mental state can have pure *consciousness* as an elemental part, either.

#### 4. JAMES'S MASTER ARGUMENT

By James's day, advocates of elementarism had amassed a trove of experimental evidence in support of their approach. So to undermine elementarism, James devoted considerable attention to showing that these experiments each afford non-elementarist interpretations as well (e.g. throughout *PP* ch. 6). But his discussions are typically inconclusive because, just as in the case of the tone-pulse experiment discussed above, the rival interpretations are underdetermined—that is, James leaves readers with the impression that both are empirically adequate with respect to the phenomena under consideration.

There is one argument James offered, however, that stands to tip the balance in favor of his own model. I will call this his 'Master Argument.' It attacks what James took to be a key elementarist assumption—that mental states can be partly or even fully *unconscious*. Let us first use an example to try to get clear on how elementarism presupposes unconscious mentality.

I am sitting at a square table as I write this, and the table is in the center of my visual field. In one sense, the tabletop surely looks square to me. But if you think I have a raw visual sensation that roughly corresponds to the 2-d image on my retina—a sensation that somehow gets mentally converted into a 3-d perception—then maybe it is more accurate to say that the table *looks* trapezoidal, but I *judge* it to be square, perhaps as the result of an unconscious inference.

What is the relationship between the supposed *sensation* that gives me a trapezoid-seeming shape (call this 'M1') and the supposed full-blown *perception* that gives me a square-seeming tabletop (call this 'M2')? The elementarist claims that M1 is a *part* of M2. Now when I am in state M2, either I am not consciously aware of M1 at the same time, or I am. If I am not, then the elementarist must treat M1 as an *unconscious* element of M2. If I *am* consciously aware of M1, I must be so aware at a different time than I am aware of M2, toggling back-and-forth between them like a duck-rabbit drawing (since no shape, and no image of a shape, can be both a trapezoid and a square at the same time). But then M1 is not really an elemental part of M2 at all—these are rather successive mental states. So if we are to regard M1 as a genuine, elemental part of M2, it must be an unconscious part.<sup>33</sup>

Now here is James's 'Master Objection' to elementarism. The claim that there is unconscious mentality requires us to:

<sup>33</sup>Hence, elementarists like Helmholtz often emphasize how difficult it is to "observe" a pure sensation, insisting that such observation is only possible with extensive training (Helmholtz, *Treatise on Physiological Optics*, III.9).

throw away the logical principle of identity in psychology, and say that, however it may fare in the outer world, the mind at any rate is a place in which a thing can be all kinds of other things without ceasing to be itself as well. (*PP* 175)

Allowing the existence of unconscious mental states (or mental state parts), James continued, “would make any definite science of psychology impossible” (*PP* 175). This is a very strong claim. The “logical principle of identity” asserts that everything is self-identical (for all  $x$ ,  $x=x$ ), and any supposed object that violates this principle surely cannot be an object of scientific inquiry.<sup>34</sup> But what is it about unconscious mentality that requires us to give up this principle, and therefore the prospect of there being a scientifically rigorous study of mind?

Consider the visual table again, and consider the property of *looking trapezoid*. Suppose we say that  $M_1$  is an unconscious part of  $M_2$ . Then we must say that  $M_2$  has the property of *looking trapezoid*, because  $M_2$  contains  $M_1$  as a part, and  $M_1$  has this property. But we must also accept that  $M_2$  *lacks* the property of *looking trapezoid* at the same time, because qua perception,  $M_2$  depicts the tabletop as square. From Leibniz’s Law, it follows that  $M_2 \neq M_2$ , which is absurd.<sup>35</sup> This is the sort of difficulty James had in mind when he claimed that elementarists must treat mental states as things that can somehow violate the “principle of identity.” He found this result intolerable.

In fairness, some elementarists like J. S. Mill and Wundt propose *chemical* composition as an analogy for how mental states might combine. Instead of saying that  $M_2$  is a simple aggregation of elements, one of which is  $M_1$ , Mill and Wundt both would say that  $M_2$  is like a chemical compound that “contains”  $M_1$  in the way water contains hydrogen and oxygen (as James later acknowledged, at *PU* 85). Just as water can contain oxygen, even though oxygen is a gas at room temperature but water is not, so Mill and Wundt can say that when  $M_1$  occurs by itself it may have properties that are flatly at odds with the properties of its sometimes mental-container,  $M_2$ . Does this sophisticated form of elementarism skirt James’s complaint?

I do not think so. Consider two more mental states.

$M_3$ : I hear a continuous tone

$M_4$ : I hear a continuous tone

Suppose  $M_3$  is qualitatively indistinguishable from  $M_4$ , even though the stimulus that produces  $M_3$  is a series of rapid tone pulses, while the stimulus that produces  $M_4$  is a continuous physical sound. The elementarist will have to say that  $M_3$  and  $M_4$  are indiscernible, and yet non-identical. After all, the mental state represented in James’s Figure 25 (reproduced above) is supposed to be a different mental state from one that does not involve a synthesis of discrete sensations. But this amounts to holding that a mental state can violate—not the principle of identity, since here

<sup>34</sup>This point would not have been controversial in James’s day: the principle of identity is “the highest law of thought, the postulate on which all science depends,” according to Harald Høffding, *Outlines of Psychology*, 177.

<sup>35</sup>Leibniz’s Law tells us that if  $x = y$ , then  $x$  and  $y$  share all the same properties. In this example,  $M_2$  does not share all of its own properties with itself, so (absurdly)  $M_2 \neq M_2$ .

we are dealing with two *different* mental states—but the identity of indiscernibles.<sup>36</sup> Again, we have an apparent violation of generally accepted principles governing identity and difference.

Elementarists who accept sensory atomism may respond that *all* cases where we perceive a continuous tone are built out of a collection of discrete sound sensations, so they may deny the existence of any mental state like M4. But this does not solve the problem. Consider two more mental states:

M5: I hear a continuous tone for one second

M6: I hear a continuous tone for one second

Suppose that M5 is produced by a stimulus that consists of a series of 500 tone-pulses per second, while M6 is produced by a stimulus that consists of a series of 501 tone-pulses per second. The single extra pulse-per-second will presumably make no noticeable difference to the experience. But then M5 will be qualitatively indistinguishable from M6 even though the collection of sensory “elements” that supposedly constitutes each is different (in one case there are 500 elements, in the other there are 501). Here, again, we have a violation of the identity of indiscernibles for mental states.

Even if objects that violate the logic of identity *could* exist, James held that they would be impossible to study scientifically—and this was his central objection to elementarism. If we allow that mental states can violate the logic of identity, then one can say anything about them without fear of being contradicted by empirical data. Thus, James called unconscious mentality “the sovereign means for believing what one likes in psychology, and of turning what might become a science into a tumbling-ground for whimsies” (PP 166).

So what I am calling James’s Master Objection to elementarism goes like this. Elementarism presupposes the existence of unconscious mentality. If there is unconscious mentality then mental states can violate the logic of identity. But mental states so-construed would be queer sorts of things that could not possibly be subject to scientific study. Thus, elementarism undermines the goal of establishing a genuine science that takes the mental state as its proper object, a goal elementarists themselves claimed to pursue.

Now James had many other arguments against elementarism, and it would be impractical to try to do them all justice here. His usual strategy was to take on both experimental and everyday phenomena that might seem to support elementarism in some way. He would then produce a rival, non-elementarist interpretation of the phenomenon in question. For instance, James reinterpreted an experiment by the German physiologist Adolf Fick, who showed that when subjects are exposed either to pressure or warmth through a small pinprick in a card, they are often unreliable at discriminating the two. Fick concluded that our ability to discriminate warmth and pressure depends on different *groupings* of minima tangibilia when larger portions of skin are stimulated. James offered his own anti-elementarist account in which the discrimination relies on different arrangements of *neural* firings (PP 153–54).

<sup>36</sup>This principle says that for all  $x$  and all  $y$ , if  $x$  and  $y$  share all the same properties, then  $x = y$ .

Unfortunately, even if we assume that James's explanations are empirically adequate with respect to these phenomena, he gives us little reason to think the rival models in each case are anything but underdetermined by the data. This is why I have called his point about unconscious mentality a Master Objection to elementarism—it is the most direct argument he offers that stands actually to tip the balance in his favor.

James drew a positive lesson from his critical discussion of elementarism. He concluded that having a phenomenal feel is part of the essence of mentality itself. Each mental state “is a conscious fact,” James wrote. “None of them has any mode of being whatever except a certain way of being felt at the moment of being present” (*PP* 174—also see 165). In other words, James accepted a simple principle about mental states: that their “esse” is just their “sentiri.” This is a view that “most thinkers have admitted historically” (*ECR* 301),<sup>37</sup> and James held that rejecting it would push us towards giving up the logic of identity for mental states.

Notice that the dispute between James and elementarists is not a merely verbal quibble. At stake is the question of what kinds of explanations shall be permitted in the new psychology. All parties agree that the way forward is to forge an alliance between physiology and psychology. But the heart of James's opposition to elementarism (and unconscious mentality more generally) is a strong preference for physiological over psychological mechanisms.<sup>38</sup> Although other sciences may admit hidden variables or elements that are in principle unobservable, James held that in the burgeoning science of psychology no such unobservables should be admitted.

##### 5. BUT DID JAMES REALLY DENY UNCONSCIOUS MENTALITY?

Before moving on, let me address some potential objections. Some commentators have suggested that James came to *accept* unconscious mental states in later work,<sup>39</sup> or even that he accepted such states in the *Principles* itself.<sup>40</sup> These scholars emphasize James's early notion of a “fringe” of consciousness as providing a foundation for his later references (especially in *VRE*) to “subconsciousness”;<sup>41</sup> they emphasize his work on “exceptional mental states” such as split-consciousness; and they emphasize his notion of habit that, in Weinberger's words, is to be explained in terms of “the desertion of consciousness from well-practiced behavior.”<sup>42</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Indeed, in regarding all mental states as conscious, James is following in the footsteps of Descartes, who wrote, “As to the fact that there can be nothing in the mind, in so far as it is a thinking thing, of which it is not aware, this seems to me to be self-evident” (*CSM* II.171; also see *CSM* II.134). What is more, two of James's strategies for eliminating purported cases of unconscious mentality (appealing to physiological mechanisms and appealing to fleeting but unremembered experiences—see *PP* 165–77) were precisely the same strategies Descartes had used; for discussion, see Alison Simmons, “Cartesian Consciousness Reconsidered,” esp. 13–14.

<sup>38</sup>Hatfield makes a similar point about the earlier debate over nativism and empirism in Germany, with Hering's nativism often coming down to a preference for, in Hatfield's words, “anatomical and physiological explanations” over psychological (*The Natural and the Normative*, 182). It is worth noticing that James was a staunch advocate of Hering's nativism.

<sup>39</sup>E.g. Eugene Taylor and Robert H. Wozniak, *Pure Experience*. A persuasive reply to Taylor and Wozniak can be found in Wesley Cooper, *The Unity of William James's Thought*, 102–6.

<sup>40</sup>E.g. Joel Weinberger, “William James and the Unconscious.”

<sup>41</sup>E.g. Edward S. Reed, *From Soul to Mind*, 167.

<sup>42</sup>Weinberger, “William James and the Unconscious,” 442.

These readings neglect the distinction between unconscious processes that are mental, and those that are nonmental. The examples the commentators cite—including the various references to “subconsciousness” in the *Varieties*—can typically be understood in terms of unconscious (physiological) processes *that are not themselves mental*. For instance, at (*VRE* 149) James endorsed the use of the word “subconscious” to refer to “cerebral functions”—that is, brain processes, *not* unconscious *mental* processes.

In contrast, in the case of “consciousness” apparently “split-off” from our normal mental lives (which James thought might be revealed by suggestion under hypnotism and by cases of multiple-personality) we have genuinely mental processes that may be odd, but they are clearly not unconscious—they are *phenomenally present* to what James calls a “secondary consciousness” (*PP* 201; also see 74, 167, 208, and for more on this see 308, below). And the case of “fringe” consciousness is also genuinely mental, but it is a kind of *consciousness* nevertheless (at *PP* 451, James referred to the fringe as a “conscious correlate” of some particular cerebral functions).

And James’s treatment of habit is also quite in line with his general ban on unconscious mentality as well. In the *Principles* it is true that he wrote, “*habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed*” (*PP* 119). But he followed this up with an account according to which habits are, at root, bodily. Acquisition of a habit diminishes conscious control precisely to the extent that “automatic” (*PP* 126) physiological function takes over. For James, a habit amounts to an acquired chain-reaction in our nervous system, a kind of bodily inscription of instructions for performing a complex task largely reflexively, without guidance from “conscious will” (*PP* 119–20). Jamesian habits are therefore performed unconsciously.

And James also suggested that habits are not just unconscious—they are also non-mental (*PP* 120, 126). He did consider the rival allegation that we should regard some habits (such as “acquired dexterities”) as mental if they are performed with an “intelligent character.” But he rejected this, instead insisting that if these dexterities are truly mental, they must be guided by consciousness at the moment they are performed even though “no memory remains” moments later (*PP* 167; the classic, contemporary illustration is arriving at work feeling that one was not fully conscious of making all the turns on the drive).<sup>43</sup> In short, James clearly regards most habits as both unconscious and nonmental; any habit that is truly mental, he thinks, carries a consciousness that is only diminished in the sense of being quickly forgotten.

Another objection crops up here. Since James’s most explicit case against unconscious mentality comes in the context of a larger attack on elementarism in chapter six of the *Principles* (James’s own term for what he is attacking is “mind stuff” theory), it is at least an open question whether (a) his repudiation of elementarism follows from a more basic objection to unconscious mentality, or (b) his repudiation of unconscious mentality follows from a more basic objection to elementarism. I am defending option (a). But if option (b) is the better reading, then perhaps it

<sup>43</sup>See n. 37, above, for Descartes’s use of a similar strategy.

can be maintained that James did not repudiate *all* unconscious mentality full-stop, but only the kinds of unconscious *mental atoms* that elementarists had proposed.<sup>44</sup>

I have two responses. First, James's repudiations of unconscious mentality span his entire career, and those repudiations are often explicit *and sweeping*, as in this passage from the *Principles*:

There is only one 'phase' in which an idea can be, and that is a fully conscious condition. If it is not in that condition, then it is not at all. (*PP* 174)

In the face of texts like this, it is difficult to maintain that James actually thinks *some* ideas in fact *can* exist without being in "a fully conscious condition"—in other words, that he somehow allows for 'unconscious mentality,' as I have been calling it. And there are a host of similar passages (see n. 71 below for another striking quotation), some published as early as 1875, others as late as 1909, where James repeatedly asserts that all mental states and processes must be conscious.<sup>45</sup>

Second, my (a)-reading directly matches what James himself says he is doing in the "Mind-Stuff" chapter. That chapter contains a subsection called "Do Unconscious Mental States Exist?," where he delivers refutations of ten purported proofs of the existence of unconscious mentality. He introduces his discussion this way:

Our reasonings [that is, James's own attack on elementarism up to this point in his chapter] have assumed that the 'integration' of a thousand psychic units must be either just the units over again, simply rebaptized, or else something real, but then other than and additional to those units; that if a certain existing fact is that of a thousand feelings, it cannot at the same time be that of ONE feeling; for the essence of feeling is to be felt, and as a psychic existent feels, so it must be. (*PP* 165–66)

James asserts that his own arguments against elementarism "have assumed" that all mentality is conscious—that, as he puts it, "the essence of feeling is to be *felt*, and as a psychic existent feels, so it must *be*." Thus at this point in the chapter James defends his ban on unconscious mentality because he takes his own attack on elementarism to rest on this assumption. And of course the logical priority of the attack on unconscious mentality is precisely what the (a)-reading claims—the (b)-reading's contention that the attack on elementarism (mind stuff) is instead logically prior simply does not match what James himself says he is doing in this chapter.

There is another text that Weinberger emphasizes, and that might be thought to cause trouble. Perhaps in this 1909 letter to Flournoy, James's failure to repudiate the Freudian unconscious actually suggests tacit acceptance:

Speaking of "functional" psychology, Clark University, of which Stanley Hall is president, had a little international congress the other day in honor of the twentieth year of its existence. I went there for one day in order to see what Freud was like, and met also Yung of Zurich, who professed great esteem for you, and made a very pleasant impression. I hope that Freud and his pupils will push their ideas to their utmost limits, so that we may learn what they are. They can't fail to throw light on human nature; but I confess that he made on me personally the impression of a man

<sup>44</sup>This objection is due to an anonymous referee.

<sup>45</sup>E.g. *ECR* (1875) 301, *ML* (1878) 5, *PP* (1890) 166, 174, *ERE* (1905) 63, and *PU* (1909) 91.



obsessed with fixed ideas. I can make nothing in my own case with his dream theories, and obviously “symbolism” is a most dangerous method. A newspaper report of the congress said that Freud had condemned the American religious therapy (which has such extensive results) as very “dangerous” because so “unscientific.” Bah!

Well, it is pouring rain and so dark that I must close. Alice joins me, dear Flournoy, in sending you our united love, in which all your children have a share. Ever yours, W. J.<sup>46</sup>

James had met Freud at the twentieth anniversary celebration of Clark’s psychology department (Clark is in Worcester, which is 40 miles from James’s home in Cambridge). He went there for one day “to see what Freud was like,” was not particularly impressed by the man, and resented the latter’s charge that American “religious therapy” was “unscientific.” James offered what I would call a backhanded compliment about the promise of Freud’s program (James hoped Freud and his students would push their ideas to the limit *so that we may learn what those ideas are*). He then hurriedly signed off the letter due to darkness and rain.

Those invested in pushing James closer to Freud read the letter differently. James attacked Freud’s treatment of dream theories and symbolism here—so why did he not also criticize the Freudian unconscious, they ask, which is central to so much of the latter’s theorizing? Perhaps the answer is that James actually accepted Freud’s conception of the unconscious. Perhaps this is endorsement by omission, they contend, particularly since James says Freud’s ideas “can’t fail to throw light on human nature.”<sup>47</sup>

But there are of course innumerable reasons other than tacit agreement that James might not have criticized the Freudian unconscious in this letter. Maybe, after scribbling a few words about his trip, the rain and darkness demanded that he pay attention to domestic matters and he simply had to finish up his letter-writing for the evening without saying more. Particularly in light of James’s repeated, explicit, sweeping—and published, I might add—repudiations of unconscious mentality, this private letter provides little evidence that James somehow accepted the existence of a Freudian unconscious.

What is more, this interpretation of the letter rather ignores James’s own fealty to the treatment of exceptional mental states by Freud’s bitter opponent, Pierre Janet.<sup>48</sup> Both students of Jean Charcot, Janet and Freud offered rival explanations of “hysteria,” including especially cases of multiple personality. Freud’s explanation appealed to *unconscious* mentality, whereas Janet proposed that traumatic experiences caused a “doubling of consciousness [*dédoublément de la conscience*]” such that an idea may be unconscious to *one* personality so long as it is phenomenally available to the “secondary consciousness” (as James calls it at *PP* 201, following Janet and Alfred Binet).<sup>49</sup> Indeed, James adopted Janet’s notion of doubled consciousness not just to explain exceptional states such as split-off personalities,<sup>50</sup> but also to explain more routine phenomena like habits, where if

<sup>46</sup>Henry Jr. James, *The Letters of William James*, II, 347–48.

<sup>47</sup>This reading of the letter also comes from the anonymous referee mentioned in n. 44, above.

<sup>48</sup>Gerald E. Myers, “James and Freud,” 594; and Gerald E. Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought*, 167–69.

<sup>49</sup>For Janet’s use of “*dédoublément de la conscience*,” see “Les Actes Inconscients,” 592; also see Janet, *L’Automatisme Psychologique*, 331.

<sup>50</sup>For James’s primary discussion of Pierre Janet on this issue, see esp. *PP* 201–8. Edmund Gurney,

“consciousness” exists at all it may exist only in a manner “split-off from the rest of the consciousness of the hemispheres” (*PP* 167).

I have already suggested that James regarded doubled consciousness as just that—cases of *conscious* mentality (see above, 306). I hasten to add that Janet himself also regarded his “hysterical” patients as harboring ideas that were unconscious only to the *primary* personality, but that were entirely conscious to the *secondary*.<sup>51</sup> So to take the lack of explicit repudiation of a Freudian unconscious in the letter quoted above as tacit endorsement, one has also to imagine that James came finally to renounce Janet’s rival account of split-off consciousness. But I can find no evidence of such a renunciation.

One who still suspects that James tacitly accepted the Freudian unconscious might also emphasize the *Varieties*’ reference to “the wonderful explorations by Binet, Janet, Breuer, Freud, Mason, Prince” (*VRE* 191). Although it is true that James refers there to “the subliminal consciousness of [the] patients with hysteria” that all these researchers discuss, he immediately characterizes these subliminal states as leading “a parasitic existence, buried *outside of the primary fields* of consciousness” (emphasis added). This is entirely consistent with James’s Janet-inspired explanation of these peculiar states as consciously present only to a “secondary personage” (*PP* 204).<sup>52</sup> So the suggestion that he was devoted (without saying so) to Freud-style, unconscious mentality is hard to square with James’s explanations of exceptional mental states in terms of Janetian “split off” consciousness, as well as with James’s own, oft-repeated claim that when it comes to mentality, *esse is sentire*.

## 6. FROM NO SENSATIONS TO NO CONSCIOUSNESS

So how did somebody who once insisted that phenomenal consciousness is part of the essence of mentality come to reject consciousness (as traditionally

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Frederic Myers, Alfred Binet, and Jules Janet were also important influences on James’s treatment of split-off consciousness.

<sup>51</sup>Janet had developed a technique for making “suggestions” to the secondary personality while the primary personality was engaged in conversation. Reflecting on this method, Janet wrote: “The suggestions that I had always considered as unconscious [*inconscientes*] were not in reality unconscious for L. [the primary personality]; Adrienne [the secondary personality] knew them all along [*les savait toujours*]” (“Les Actes Inconscients,” 589, my translation). Thus, despite his helpful discussion of James’s debt to Janet, it is misleading that Gerald Myers persistently characterizes experiences of the “secondary personage” as “unconscious” throughout Myers, “James and Freud”; also see Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought*, 10, 167–69.

<sup>52</sup>The referee mentioned in n. 44 and 47, above, presses me about this *Varieties* passage, suggesting that the reference to Freud as doing “wonderful” work also demonstrates an acceptance of a Freudian unconscious. Again, that conclusion is unwarranted. James was not stingy with compliments, even for interlocutors whose most important views he pointedly opposed. For example, he described Royce’s *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* as “one of the very freshest, profoundest, solidest, most human bits of philosophical work I’ve seen in a long time,” and described Royce himself as “a man from whom nothing is too great to expect” (from an 1885 letter to Howison, *CWJ* VI.6). If one were to infer from his unrestrained praise that James accepted the existence of Royce’s Absolute, one would obviously be mistaken. The referee also points to a well-known remark by Ernest Jones, an early devotee of Freud. During the visit to Clark University, Jones recalls James telling him that “The future of psychology belongs to your work” (Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, 260–61). Here again, warm praise is entirely consistent with sharp disagreement, particularly when the praise comes from James.

construed) altogether? To answer this question, I now turn to his 1904 essay, “Does Consciousness Exist?”

Arguments about consciousness were at the heart of the turn-of-the century rise of philosophical realism and the associated downfall of idealism. In particular, G. E. Moore’s attack on idealism relied on the claim that *consciousness* and the *object* of consciousness must be two distinct “entities.” Perhaps his best-remembered argument along these lines comes in his 1903 “Refutation of Idealism,” a seminal document for the rise of analytic philosophy. James, too, defended realism and opposed idealism—but he attacked Moore as relying on an unworkable conception of consciousness.

Moore had asked what the difference is between a sensation of blue and a sensation of green. Clearly, the two *share* something at least in virtue of both being sensations of one sort or another. Moore explained this similarity by claiming that they share a common “element” (his word), an element he termed “consciousness.”<sup>53</sup>

What makes the sensations *different* is thus not the kinds of mental states they are, Moore contended, but rather the different “objects” they each have—a blue patch in the one case, a green patch in the other.<sup>54</sup> Thus we cannot make sense of what the sensations of blue and green *share* without postulating a common entity (viz. this thing he calls “consciousness”), nor can we make sense of what *distinguishes* the sensations without postulating some entities that are distinct from this consciousness (viz. the different *objects* blue and green). Consciousness and object must therefore be two different “entities.” It follows that *esse* is *percipi* is false as a general principle, and that any form of idealism premised on this old doctrine must therefore be false as well.<sup>55</sup>

Now Moore also made an appeal to introspection to support his claim that consciousness and object are distinct entities:

When we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue: the other element [“consciousness”] is as if it were diaphanous. Yet it can be distinguished if we look attentively enough, and if we know that there is something to look for.<sup>56</sup>

His thought is that if we carefully attend to a sensation of blue, we find that we can internally “see” not just the blueness, but also a distinct mental entity, namely, the *consciousness* that in some sense envelops the blue.<sup>57</sup> In short, Moore held that we could distinguish consciousness and object using introspection.

Notice that Moore wrote about a consciousness *of* this or that object. He claimed that every act of consciousness is always “consciousness of” something or other.<sup>58</sup> In other words, Moore denied the existence of what we would today call *intransitive*

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<sup>53</sup>“We all know that the sensation of blue differs from that of green. But it is plain that if both are sensations they also have some point in common. What is it that they have in common? And how is this common *element* related to the points in which they differ? I will call the common element ‘consciousness.’” (Moore, “The Refutation of Idealism,” emphasis added).

<sup>54</sup>Moore notoriously vacillated about whether or not these patches are mind-dependent.

<sup>55</sup>Moore, “The Refutation of Idealism,” 444–45; also see Moore, “The Subject-Matter of Psychology,” 36–37.

<sup>56</sup>Moore, “The Refutation of Idealism,” 450; quoted at *ERE* 455–56.

<sup>57</sup>Later, Moore would deny that consciousness and object are always *introspectively* “separable,” even though he maintained that a blue-patch/green-patch argument does show that the two must always be “distinct” nevertheless (Moore, “The Subject-Matter of Psychology,” 38–39).

<sup>58</sup>Moore, “The Subject-Matter of Psychology,” 38.

consciousness—a bare *awareness* that is not also an awareness *of* something. Thus, the conscious “element” of any given mental state is always transitive, for Moore—it always points to some distinct object. There can be no consciousness that is not paired with (and introspectively distinguishable from) some object, on his view.

What has James’s attack on elementarism to do with this distinction between consciousness and object? Moore treated consciousness as an “element” in a more complex mental state. If the notion of complex mental states built out of mental elements is incoherent, then of course consciousness cannot be a mental element, either.

Now Moore was not the only target of “Does Consciousness Exist?”—James also took idealists like Paul Natorp to advocate a practically similar division between two parts of occurrent mental states, consciousness and (to use Natorp’s word) “content” (*ERE* 3, 6, and *MEN* 28). Natorp had claimed that we cannot define “consciousness,” but we can separate consciousness from its “content” through analysis. Here is how James replied:

“Can be brought out by analysis,” this author says [of consciousness]. This supposes that the consciousness is one element, moment, factor—call it what you like—of an experience of essentially dualistic inner constitution, from which, if you abstract the content, the consciousness will remain revealed to its own eye. (*ERE* 6)

Passages like this illustrate James’s anti-elementarist worries about consciousness. But unlike his careful argument against *sensory*-elementarism, his attack on what we might call consciousness-elementarism was much quicker, commonly relying on metaphor and colorful phenomenological description.

Let us bring this later attack into focus by considering how the passage continues. On theories like Natorp’s, experience:

would be much like a paint of which the world pictures were made. Paint has a dual constitution, involving, as it does, a menstruum (oil, size or what not) and a mass of content in the form of pigment suspended therein. We can get the pure menstruum by letting the pigment settle, and the pure pigment by pouring off the size or oil. We operate here by physical subtraction; and the usual view is, that by mental subtraction we can separate the two factors of experience in an analogous way—not isolating them entirely, but distinguishing them enough to know that they are two.

Now my contention is exactly the reverse of this. Experience, I believe, has no such inner duplicity. (*ERE* 6)<sup>59</sup>

One can see James treating the distinction between consciousness and content as a close cousin of the elementarist distinction between sensation and perception.<sup>60</sup> Just as James had rejected the notion that we can separate simple sensations from the complex perceptions they supposedly compose, here he rejected the notion that we can “separate” “one element” of our mental state called “consciousness,” an element that would remain if we could somehow screen off the state’s “content” or object.

<sup>59</sup>George Trumbull Ladd had described consciousness as a “menstruum” (*Psychology, Descriptive and Explanatory*, 30), and James quoted the Ladd passage at *ERE* 6n; cf. *MEN* 28.

<sup>60</sup>In fairness to Moore, a central burden of “Refutation of Idealism” is to show that the relationship between blue and the sensation of blue is *not* to be construed as a relationship between consciousness and *content* (“content” was the word James attributed to Natorp, not Moore). Instead, the relation is one of *awareness* or *knowing*, and Moore explicitly denied that the blueness is just a property of the mental state *awareness-of-blue* (Moore, “The Refutation of Idealism,” 449–50). Still, Moore consistently characterized *consciousness* as an “element” of a more complex mental state, and that is what is at issue, for James.

Elsewhere that same year, James discussed the notion of consciousness with a similarly anti-elementarist agenda:

When I perceive the object before me as a table of such and such a shape, at such a distance, I am told that this fact of perception is due to two factors: a sensible matter that penetrates into me by means of my eyes and which provides the element of real exteriority, and ideas which are awakened, which meet with this reality, classify and interpret it. But who can distinguish in the table concretely perceived between what is sensation and what is idea? The external and the internal, the extended and the not extended fuse and make an indissoluble marriage. This brings to mind those circular panoramas in which real objects—rocks, grass, broken carts, etc., placed in the foreground—are so cunningly joined to the canvas backdrop on which there is represented a battle-scene or a vast landscape, that one can no longer distinguish between objects and painted representations. The seams and joints are imperceptible.

Could this occur if object and idea were absolutely dissimilar in nature? (*ERE* 265; also see *MEN* 31)<sup>61</sup>

My initial discussion of James's anti-elementarism drew heavily on the "Mind-Stuff" chapter of *The Principles of Psychology*, where he was concerned to show that mental states do not have sensory "seams and joints" that need to be parsed. Here "the seams and joints" at issue would separate a mental state's supposed *consciousness* from its *content* or *object*. The quoted passage contends that at least in outer perception, disentangling the part of a mental state that is contributed by the mind—the supposed *consciousness* part—from the part contributed by the senses—the supposed *object* part—is an introspectively impossible task.

Before evaluating this contention, let me address another interpretive objection. Critics might point to James's 1895 "The Knowing of Things Together" as undermining my claim that anti-elementarist concerns were at play almost a decade later in "Does Consciousness Exist?"<sup>62</sup> This is because the 1895 paper is often read as renouncing the official line of the *Principles*, according to which mental states are never composed of separable elements. But that is not a defensible reading of the 1895 piece, which repeats some of the very same arguments from the *Principles* to the effect that mental states cannot have proper parts. For instance, the later essay claims that when we experience several qualities together (like in the case of perceiving mixed "pigments" or "tones"), we should not say that there has been a "fusion" of many separate feelings, but rather that there is one feeling whose "content resembles somewhat each of the objects A, B, and C" (*EP* 81–82). He even repeats a key example (the combination of lemon and sugar in an entirely new taste of lemonade; *EP* 87n15) that he had used for anti-elementarist purposes in the *Principles* (at *PP* 160n13). Similarly, the 1895 passage in which James is supposed dramatically to concede that there really are psychological atoms actually does no such thing:

I am willing, consequently, henceforward that mental contents should be called complex, just as their objects are, and this even in psychology. *Not because their parts*

<sup>61</sup>The passage is from James's "*La Notion de Conscience*," which originally appeared in French as William James, "La Notion De Conscience." The essay was reprinted in *ERE* in 1912, still in the original French; I am using Salvatore Saladino's 1967 translation, which is reprinted as an appendix in the *Works* edition (*ERE* 261–71).

<sup>62</sup>I thank an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

*are separable, as the parts of objects are; not because they have an eternal or quasi-eternal individual existence, like the parts of objects; for the various 'contents' of which they are parts are integers, existentially, and their parts only live as long as they live. Still, in them, we can call parts, parts.* (EP 88, first emphasis added)

We can “call” a mental state complex, but this is shorthand for saying that a unified mental state can resemble many different individual objects. That is precisely the point of the lemonade example, where Meinong is accused of not realizing that lemonade can “resemble” both lemon and sugar at once, *even though lemon and sugar are not truly separate flavors* in the taste of lemonade. “Complex” mental states, on James’s 1895 usage, then, are just states that can resemble a diversity of separate objects, not mental states that have separable parts—indeed, he says as much in the first-emphasized passage, above.

Let us return to James’s later attack on elementarist conceptions of consciousness. We have just seen him likening conscious states to those “cunning” “panoramas” where viewers are unable to distinguish figure from ground. But he does not have to rest his case on metaphor or colorful introspective description. This is because similar considerations to those he brought to bear against sensory-elementarism also undermine consciousness-elementarism. To see this, consider that for consciousness to count as a proper mental *element*, it must have properties that are *durable* in the sense that they do not change depending on the mental state they help comprise (as James emphasized in likening whole mental states to soap bubbles, at PP 268n36). Compare the case of chemistry. Chemical elements are defined in terms of the number of protons in an atom’s nucleus. If a free oxygen atom somehow gained a proton when binding to hydrogen in a water molecule, we should not say that we had the same element—oxygen—in both cases. Elements are not elements unless they have some core properties that remain invariant in different contexts. So *mental* elements would need some core properties that remain invariant in different *mental* contexts, too.

But James can make a strong case that *pure consciousness*, if there could be such a thing, would fail this test. Let us return to Moore’s example. Suppose that one could break down the experience of blue into elements (per impossible, according to James), like this:

M7: Blue object

M8: Pure consciousness

M9: Consciousness of blue

For consciousness-elementarists like Moore and Natorp, M9 should *contain* M7 and M8 as elementary parts:<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Again, Moore vacillated about whether M7—the blue “object” of the experience, in his terms—is physical or mental. If it is physical, it is presumably not part of the mental state M9. But then Moore faces familiar problems of direct realism, such as how to explain hallucinated or dreamed perceptions of blue. In any case, Moore clearly calls the *pure consciousness* (M8 in this example) an “element” of the overall experience of blue (see n. 60, above), and hence James’s problem arises as much for Moore (with respect to pure consciousness) as it does for Natorp.

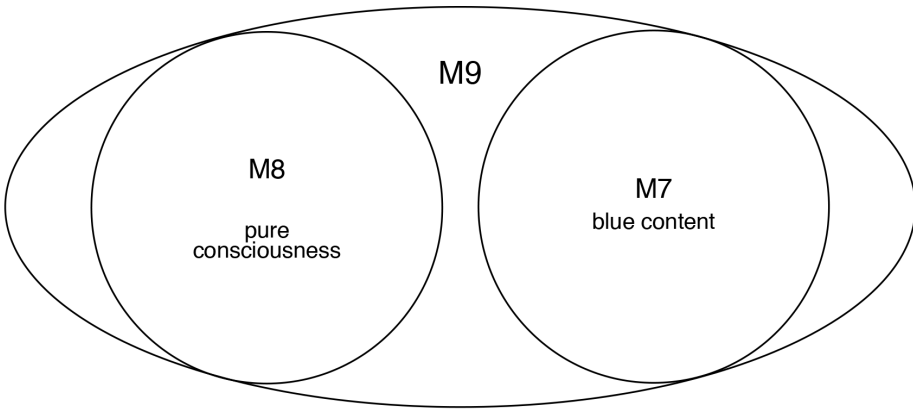


Figure 3.

Now, Moore asks us introspectively to “look,” so to speak, at the *consciousness of blue* so that we can directly “see” that it has *pure consciousness* as a distinct element. When we do this we presumably are in a new, higher-order mental state that has the *consciousness of blue* (with all *its* parts) as an object:

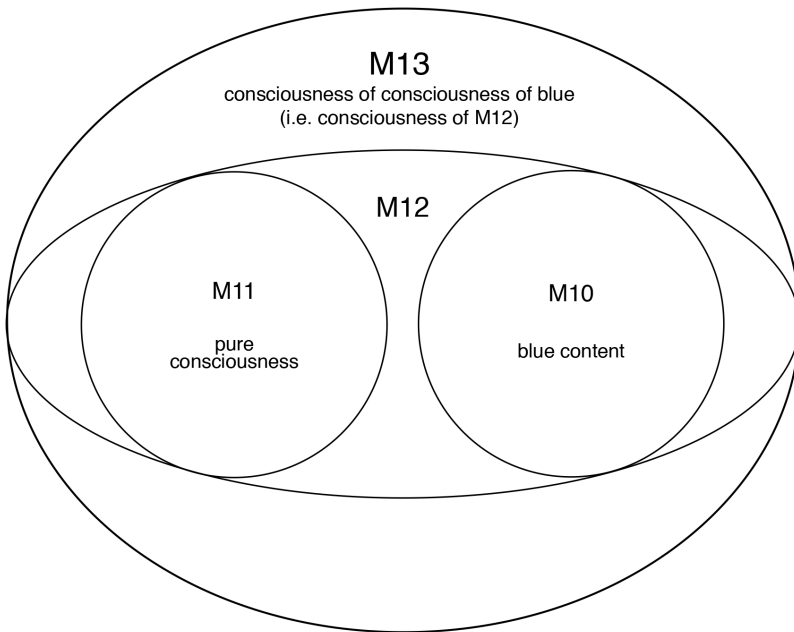


Figure 4.

If *pure consciousness* is a common “element” of both mental states (as Moore explicitly claims is the case, and as his argument requires), then M11 and M8 should not be phenomenally discernible. If they were discernible, then pure consciousness would lack the kind of context-invariance it would need to count as a genuine mental element.

But is it plausible to think that M11 and M8 are indiscernible? James had considered a question like this in the *Principles*, and his answer was *no*:

the psychologist must not only have his mental states in their absolute veritableness, he must report them and write about them, name them, classify and compare them and trace their relations to other things. Whilst alive they are their own property; it is only post-mortem that they become his prey. . . . The present conscious state, when I say ‘I feel tired,’ is not the direct feeling of tire; when I say ‘I feel angry,’ it is not the direct state of anger. It is the state of *saying-I-feel-tired*, of *saying-I-feel-angry*,—entirely different matters, so different that the fatigue and anger apparently included in them are considerable modifications of the fatigue and anger directly felt the previous instant. The act of naming them has momentarily detracted from their force. (PP 189–90)

James was drawing on the homespun (but not implausible) advice that one can diminish the intensity of one’s own anger or fatigue by pausing and introspecting on those feelings. If the advice is sound, this suggests that the consciousness involved in feeling angry or tired is qualitatively different from what is involved in being conscious *of* one’s conscious experience of anger or fatigue.<sup>64</sup>

Whether or not the point can be generalized to include cases that involve outer perception, such as in the example of seeing blue, consciousness-elementarists cannot even accept James’s treatment of anger and fatigue. Such elementarism requires that anger and introspected-anger involve an identical conscious “element.” Thus to the extent one thinks James has a compelling treatment of the examples of anger and fatigue, one should think James has a compelling reason to reject the notion that consciousness is an elemental part of our occurrent mental states.

The argument presents a clear problem for Natorp, but we should acknowledge that Moore does have a potential solution available. Where, Moore might ask, should we locate the (alleged) phenomenal difference between perceiving blue and introspecting on perceiving blue? I have located the phenomenal difference in the “pure consciousness” part of the two mental states (in M8 and M11) rather than in the “content” part (M7 and M10). For Natorp, nothing turns on this choice, since he portrays *both* consciousness and content as mental elements, so *both* must be durable. But if Moore is prepared to treat the blue object as mind-independent (he is unclear about this; see n. 54, above), then unlike Natorp he need only treat *consciousness* (and not object) as a durable, mental element. Suppose Moore then locates the difference between perceiving and introspecting on the *object* side—i.e. suppose Moore says that what is phenomenally different in these two cases is not the quality of the pure consciousnesses involved, but rather a qualitative difference in the blue patch. He can then claim that the pure

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<sup>64</sup>This kind of phenomenal difference—between having a feeling and introspecting it—was widely accepted in the nineteenth century, largely due to the influence of a famous passage from Comte (*The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, I.12).



consciousness does *not* change in the two cases, and thus *does* have the requisite durability to count as a mental element.

The response is at least coherent, but at best implausible. It assumes that the object of my perception is some physical patch of blue, like a covering of paint on the wall. But it is highly peculiar to claim that *the paint itself* changes depending on whether I am either naively perceiving or introspecting on my perception. But that is the bullet Moore would have to bite in order to retain his conception of consciousness as an unchanging “element” of a mental state.

#### 7. SO WHAT IS CONSCIOUSNESS?

An enduring mystery in the secondary literature concerns the relationship between James’s apparent repudiation of consciousness in his 1904 “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” and his seemingly free use of this concept in his earlier psychology.<sup>65</sup> The problem is that, in the 1904 paper, James claimed to have “mistrusted ‘consciousness’ as an entity” for 20 years already. But in *The Principles of Psychology*, which had appeared only 14 years earlier, James had written that we all “unhesitatingly believe” we find “states of consciousness” when we introspect—and even that a conscious state is easily “distinguish[ed] . . . from all the objects with which it may cognitively deal” (*PP* 185; also see 195–96). So what gives? I want to end by suggesting that there is more continuity between his early and late treatments of consciousness than one might suspect.

The key is to see that even in 1904, James wanted to retain *a* notion of consciousness. He denies that the word “stands for an entity,” but insists that “it does stand for a function” (*ERE* 4). Before examining this passage more closely, we do well to take heed of the distinction between entities and functions as James was accustomed to drawing it.

A particularly illuminating example of his usage comes in a response to critics who had attacked his well-known theory of emotion a decade earlier. For James, our emotions are perceptions of our own bodily responses, like sweaty palms, increased heart rate, and so on. We do not strike because we are angry, he famously wrote; instead, we are “angry because we strike” (*EPs* 170). In other words, anger is the perception of our own bodies manifesting characteristic responses, such as striking or yelling.

In a rejoinder to criticisms of his view, James wrote that one critic:

accuses me of self-contradiction in admitting that the symptoms of the same emotion vary from one man to another, and yet that the emotion has them for its cause. How can any definite emotion, he asks, exist under such circumstances, and what is there then left to give unity to such concepts as anger or fear at all? (*EPs* 303–4)

The critic in question (D. Irons) had complained that “if consciousness of . . . [bodily] changes alone is the emotion,” then the bodily changes of which a given emotion is the perception cannot “vary indefinitely,” as James himself had suggested.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>65</sup>E.g. Owen Flanagan, “Consciousness as a Pragmatist Views It”; and Güven Güzeldere, “Many Faces,” 51n.

<sup>66</sup>D. Irons, “Prof. James’ Theory of Emotion,” 82.

James's response is relevant to my discussion because of the way he relies on a distinction between entities and functions:

The natural reply is that the bodily variations are within limits, and that the symptoms of the angers and of the fears of different men still preserve enough *functional* resemblance, to say the very least, in the midst of their diversity to lead us to call them by identical names. Surely there is no definite affection of 'anger' in an 'entitative' sense. (*EPs* 304)

The thought is that there is no *one thing* that anger feels like—no experiential atom that recurs as a component part of all complex anger states. James has to admit this, since he takes emotions to be perceptions of bodily reactions, and since bodily reactions that manifest anger (or any other emotion) are obviously diverse, both intra- and inter-personally. Instead, there is a "*functional* resemblance" between the bodily reactions that we count as manifestations of anger. This is what ties diverse anger experiences together, for James, not any simple feeling they all share.

We must be careful not to read James's appeals to *functions* through the lens of later, homonymic views in the philosophy of mind, such as Putnam's machine-state functionalism. For James, a function is not a program in an input/output device (such as we find instantiated in Turing machines).<sup>67</sup> Given his academic background in physiology and his enduring interest in evolution,<sup>68</sup> he likely had in mind a biological sense of "function" such as we find in the definitive English-language dictionary of the era:

The specific office or action which any organ or system of organs is *fitted* to perform in the animal or vegetable economy; as, the *function* of the heart, of leaves, &c.; the specific office of anything belonging to a living being, as the body as a whole, the mind of man, or any faculty of the mind.<sup>69</sup>

"Fitted" has an evolutionary connotation here, so that "the *function* of the heart" is the action the heart has evolved to perform. And when James writes about the "function" of anger, I take it he means the office the bodily manifestations of that emotion have evolved to perform.

For the sake of illustration, suppose the evolutionary function of anger is to incentivize the target of the emotion to prioritize the welfare of the angry agent.<sup>70</sup> James would say that *whatever* it may feel like to threaten to "strike" someone, it is in virtue of potentially functioning in social negotiation in appropriate ways that such a state counts as a bodily manifestation of anger. Quite different bodily states (e.g. screaming versus refusing to speak at all) can play a similar role in social negotiation, even though those states may all *feel* quite different, phenomenally. That is the sort of "functional resemblance" James thinks might tie all anger states together.

<sup>67</sup>A classic account of mental functions in terms of Turing-machines is Hilary Putnam, "Minds and Machines."

<sup>68</sup>Eugene Taylor, "Origin of James's Psychology"; and Trevor Pearce, "James and Evolution."

<sup>69</sup>John Ogilvie and Charles Annandale, *Imperial Dictionary*, 346, first emphasis added; this is the third usage.

<sup>70</sup>This has been proposed more recently in Aaron Sell, John Tooby, and Leda Cosmides, "Formidability and the Logic of Human Anger," 15073.

I submit that he is making a similar point about consciousness in his 1904 paper. Just as there is no one thing it feels like to be angry, James is now prepared to say that *there is no one thing it feels like to be conscious*. In his words, he means to deny that “consciousness”:

stands for an entity, but to insist most emphatically that it does stand for a function. . . . That function is knowing. ‘Consciousness’ is supposed necessary to explain the fact that things not only are, but get reported, are known. Whoever blots out the notion of consciousness from his list of first principles must still provide in some way for that function’s being carried on. (*ERE* 4)

Right through the end of his life, James retained the notion that it is part of the essence of mental states to have a phenomenal feel,<sup>71</sup> so here he cannot simply be denying that we are ever phenomenally conscious. Instead, in light of the way he was accustomed to distinguishing between entities and functions, I suggest that here James still accepts that mental states have *some* phenomenally conscious feel *or other*—but he denies that there is some *one thing* it feels like to be conscious. That is what he means by denying that consciousness is “an entity.”

So James comes to advocate what we might call ‘consciousness pluralism.’ If one asks, “does it feel like some one thing to be conscious?” the pluralist answers in the negative. To borrow the well-worn phrasing,<sup>72</sup> it does not feel like *any* (one) *thing* to be a bat, James is telling us; it feels like many things.

The obvious question the consciousness pluralist must then answer is, if there is no one single phenomenal quality, and no definable list of phenomenal qualities, that all conscious states share, what distinguishes conscious from non-conscious states? To answer this question, James’s 1904 paper uses the same strategy he had employed against his critic Irons on the topic of emotion.<sup>73</sup> The states we group together under the general term “conscious” do not have a common, “entitative” part—there is no experiential atom they all share. Instead, they share a *function*. “That function is knowing,” as we have seen.

Without getting sidetracked into a broad discussion of what “knowing” amounts to for James, we can draw a quick sketch of his view from his 1885 “On the Function of Cognition.” That essay claims that a mental state *knows* some object just in case the mental state affords a “power of *interfering*” with that object (*MT* 22).<sup>74</sup> James cites this account in “Does Consciousness Exist?” (*ERE* 14). When that later article describes a “functional resemblance” between all conscious states, then, the idea is roughly that they all afford a power of interfering with some object or other, including presumably with another mental object.<sup>75</sup> In a nutshell, James’s 1904

<sup>71</sup>This is clear from a passage published five years after “Does Consciousness Exist?” where James wrote that whether Berkeley was “right or not in saying of material existence that its *esse* is *sentiri*, it is undoubtedly right to say of *mental* existence that its *esse* is *sentiri* or *experiri*. If I feel pain, it is just pain that I feel, however I may have come by the feeling. No one pretends that pain as such only appears like pain, but in itself is different, for to be as a mental experience is only to appear to someone” (*PU* 91).

<sup>72</sup>Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”

<sup>73</sup>See above, n. 66.

<sup>74</sup>For more on James’s interesting account of intentionality, consult Henry Jackman, “James’ Pragmatic Account of Intentionality and Truth”; and Steven Levine, “William James and Phenomenology.”

<sup>75</sup>A host of obvious philosophical difficulties crop up for James’s view of knowledge when it is sketched so briefly, but I have to leave these issues for another occasion. For one thing, James is going

position is that consciousness is a particular *office* that mental states evolved to perform; the office in question is to afford a power of interfering with objects, both mental and physical.

Recall, now, Moore's claim that the sensations of blue and of green share an "element" (viz. consciousness) but are distinguished by their different "objects" (viz. the respective patches of color). The notion of a shared functional role gives James a way to explain the similarity between these two mental states without advertent to any shared entity. Two states both *function* as conscious states, on this view, just in case they both deliver knowledge in the relevant sense. And rather than following Natorp in distinguishing the two states in terms of their different "content," James can distinguish the two by appealing to the different objects they serve to acquaint the subject with (a patch of blue in one case, green in another).

The result is that phenomenal character comes apart from consciousness in a radical way, for the mature James. It is not in virtue of having some phenomenal character or other that any given mental state counts as conscious, surprisingly enough. It is in virtue of performing an appropriate functional role (namely, affording knowledge) that a mental state counts as conscious.

Could there be a mental state that has a phenomenal feel, yet fails to be conscious in James's preferred sense? It seems that by 1904, James would have to admit that this is a *conceptual* possibility. But unless he was willing to reverse himself and accept that there are genuine mental states that are unconscious, he would presumably have to say that mental states *as a matter of psychological or biological fact* are always conscious, and always conscious not because they have a phenomenal feel but because they always function to acquaint us with some object. Perhaps that view is not far-fetched—Moore, at any rate, held that conscious states are always transitive, as we have seen. I take it James would agree, but would treat this as a contingent psychological generalization rather than a conceptual fact.<sup>76</sup>

In any case, I suggest there is more continuity between James's early and late views on consciousness than commentators typically suppose. Throughout his career, James held that "to be as a mental experience *is* only to appear to someone;"<sup>77</sup> and both early and late, he held that there are no recurring experiential atoms. What changed in 1904 is just that James extended this latter,

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to have to explain how we could ever know an object that no longer exists, an issue he takes up in "The Existence of Julius Caesar" (*MT* 120–22). He also has to explain how non-perceptual experiences can have a "representative function," a point James himself acknowledges at (*ERE* 107), and then deals with in "The Place of Affectional Facts in a World of Pure Experience" (*ERE* 69–78).

<sup>76</sup>This is not the place to explore James's mature metaphysics in detail. But a major theme of the essays collected in *ERE* is that the whole universe is composed of something he calls "pure experience." Despite the moniker, pure experience is meant to be ontologically neutral between being a mental and a physical thing. Metaphysically speaking, it is bits of pure experience that count as conscious, mental states when they function in an appropriate way (i.e. when they deliver knowledge in the relevant sense). Russell would later endorse a similar view and rename it "neutral monism." The questions of why James first espoused neutral monism and of why he rejected the existence of consciousness as an entity are distinct. In the present paper, I only address the latter question. I briefly address the former question in Klein, "Hatfield on American Critical Realism," where I evaluate the genesis of James's proto-neutral monism as it appears in James's aforementioned 1895 essay, "The Knowing of Things Together."

<sup>77</sup>For the full 1909 quotation, see n. 71, above.

anti-elementarist claim about the contents of perception to consciousness itself. Just as he had denied that there is any one thing it feels like to see a patch of red or to experience anger, he came also to deny that there is any one thing it feels like to be conscious.

## 8. CONCLUSION

James is sometimes said to have had few real *students* in the sense of professionals who carried on a Jamesean program in psychology. But he was one of the most eminent American intellectuals, in any field, when he published “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” in 1904.<sup>78</sup> His attack on consciousness had an influence that was robust and undeniable in the early twentieth century,<sup>79</sup> although the comparatively dim fate of his positive, functional account of consciousness is instructive. Psychologists like James’s erstwhile colleague E. A. Singer were inspired by James’s criticism of consciousness as “an entity” to develop early forms of behaviorism—but they were puzzled by, and ultimately ignored, his functionalist alternative.

Thus, Singer characterized James’s pragmatism as defining meaning in terms of “the concrete difference to some one which . . . [an idea’s] being true will make.” Singer heartily endorsed this account, claiming that by this standard the distinction between conscious and unconscious human behavior illustrated “the meaning of the ‘meaningless.’”<sup>80</sup> But then Singer recounted the “burden of disappointment” he felt upon reading his old mentor’s discussion of consciousness in connection with the automatic sweetheart.<sup>81</sup> A proper pragmatist *should* say, according to Singer, that “Consciousness is not something inferred from behavior, it is behavior.”<sup>82</sup> He was writing in 1911, two years before Watson’s behaviorist manifesto.<sup>83</sup>

Although today we associate *behaviorism* with the demise of consciousness, in fact James’s earlier attack had already landed a blow on this concept, at least as it had traditionally been understood. As such, when Watson wrote his manifesto in 1913 he could count on scores of readers in psychology and philosophy already to have serious misgivings about consciousness.

In the final analysis, however, James’s earlier scruples about consciousness did not stem from behaviorist-style concerns about the privacy of the mental, but from concerns about a then-influential conception of mental states as complex things that are composed of simple, unobservable, atomic parts, I have argued. Mental states—phenomenally rich, *conscious* states—are not complex structures

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<sup>78</sup>The American Psychological Association and the American Philosophical Association both elected James president. Universities in Padua, Rome, Oxford, Durham, Geneva, Edinburgh, Copenhagen, Paris, Milan, Berlin, and Moscow all awarded him honors, as did Princeton and Yale. And the National Academy of Science, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and even the British Academy all elected him to honorary memberships; see Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought*, 1–2.

<sup>79</sup>See n. 9 above.

<sup>80</sup>Singer, “Mind as an Observable Object,” 181.

<sup>81</sup>This is from an oft-quoted, 1908 passage where James suggested that a robotic creature whose behaviors mimicked a living “sweetheart” would still be unsatisfying because behavior “is valued mainly as an expression, as a manifestation of the accompanying consciousness believed in” (*MT* 103n2).

<sup>82</sup>Singer, “Mind as an Observable Object,” 183

<sup>83</sup>I thank Galen Strawson for calling my attention to Singer’s discussion of James’s “automatic sweetheart.”

built from parts, but inviolable wholes, and this is a theme that ties together much of James's reflections on the mind, from his early scientific work to his later more philosophical projects. I give him the last word:

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.* (PP 233)<sup>84</sup>

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