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## The Stream of Consciousness (1892)

William James

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The first and foremost concrete fact which every one will affirm to belong to his inner experience is the fact that consciousness of some sort goes on. 'States of mind' succeed each other in him. If we could say in English 'it thinks,' as we say 'it rains' or 'it blows,' we should be stating the fact most simply and with the minimum of assumption. As we cannot, we must simply say that thought goes on.

...How does it go on? We notice immediately four important characters in the process, of which it shall be the duty of the present chapter to treat in a general way :

1) Every 'state' tends to be part of a personal consciousness. 2) Within each personal consciousness states are always changing. 3) Each personal consciousness is sensibly continuous. 4) It is interested in some parts of its object to the exclusion of others, and welcomes or rejects -- chooses from among them, in a word -- all the while....

Consciousness is in constant change. I do not mean by this to say that no one state of mind has any duration -- even if true, that would be hard to establish. What I wish to lay stress on is this, that no state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before. Now we are seeing, now hearing; now reasoning, now willing; now recollecting, now expecting; now loving, now hating; and in a hundred other ways we know our minds to be alternately engaged....

...The grass out of the window now looks to me of the same green in the sun as in the shade, and yet a painter would have to paint one part of it dark brown, another part bright yellow, to give its real sensational effect...

Such a difference as this could never have been sensibly learned; it had to be inferred from a series of indirect considerations. These make us believe that our sensibility is altering all the time, so that the same object cannot easily give us the same sensation over again. We feel things differently accordingly as we are sleepy or awake, hungry or full, fresh or tired; differently at night and in the morning, differently in summer and in winter; and above all, differently in childhood, manhood, and old age. And yet we never doubt that our feelings reveal the same world, with the same sensible qualities and the same sensible things occupying it. The difference of the sensibility is shown best by the difference of our emotion about the things from one age to another, or when we are in different organic moods, What was bright and exciting becomes weary, flat, and unprofitable. The bird's song is tedious, the breeze is mournful, the sky is sad.

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....

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