

Preface

To understand the nature of consciousness and experience, we must avoid traps set for us by the syntax of language, wake from the spell cast over our intelligence by the subject-predicate and subject-verb-object forms of expression, and make conceptual contact with the raw unverbilized stream of experience. Claims like this are all but explicit in William James's *Principles of Psychology*, and such claims led to James's later formulation and adoption of experiential monism, a form of monism that has been neglected for too long in the philosophy of mind.

This book attempts to present a revitalized monism in which the physical and mental are treated as poles within experience, as aspects of unitary moments that take shape in ongoing streams of experience. *Onflow* provides an accurate, general characterization and analysis of experience and a highly detailed rendition of experience from within. The characterization is applicable to every moment in anyone's waking experience, anywhere, at any time, in whatever mood or emotional state or culture, in your body or mine, in your life or mine. Perhaps this claim seems inflated, but it crisply suggests what a philosophical account of consciousness and experience must achieve.

In 1904, as an outgrowth of his work on the stream of consciousness (he coined the phrase), William James argued for a radical empiricism that differed from traditional (sense-perception- and observation-based) empiricism by also paying attention to the unobservable, felt, continuities in the stream of consciousness. Radical empiricists, who want to ground their analyses in the realities of experience and conscious life, must try to get as close as they can conceptually to the embodied, socialized, language-influenced stream of waking subjective life. In this book, which carries forward Jamesian radical empiricism, notable progress is made in the conceptual approach to the

stream. As a result, readers may come to apprehend the formation of thoughts and perceptions, the intertwining of perception and action and the working of consciousness in the course of action, the functioning of value and memory in the moment, and may come to appreciate as well how language distorts our understanding of experience and subjectivity.

To approach the elusive stream, I draw principally on the works of William James and Alfred North Whitehead. I also rely extensively on ideas and analyses presented in the works of John Searle and Gerald Edelman. My argument proceeds through a series of approximations intended to put the reader in close conceptual contact with the onflow of experience. The first approximation or conceptual model is “psychological” and is rooted in James. It provides radically empirical benchmarks that I take to impose criteria of accuracy and explanatory requirements on any theory of consciousness. (Note that James’s famous characterization of the stream of thought and his influential identification and description of the characters of thought remain phenomenologically sound. Among neuroscientists, Edelman and Antonio Damasio hold theories of consciousness that explicitly claim to accord with James’s analysis of the characters of thought.) To make James’s views more contemporary philosophically, I then employ methods of analysis developed by Searle in his theory of intentionality. En route to developing an “intentional approximation,” I give James an intentionality-based interpretation that enriches several of his central notions. Nonetheless, Searle’s theory of intentionality generally attends more to the logical structure of intentional states than to phenomenological questions, and was not conceived with express sensitivity to the continuities in the stream of experience. But, if one adopts a Jamesian, radically empirical, outlook, Searle’s tools of analysis are helpful in understanding fluid intentional phenomena, and in the subsequent “processual approximation” I use ideas from James and Searle to show how intentional states are embedded in the stream of consciousness and to treat the stream as a flow of intentionality. With this approximation, readers are prepared to make contact with the very formation of propositional (intentional) content and with the functioning of consciousness in onflowing experience. It is at this juncture that Whitehead becomes the central figure. For Whitehead, each moment is an “act of experience,” a process of formation of a concrete experience, a “concrecence.” As James had it too, although each such act comes as its own subjective unity, it arises within the stream,

emerging from its direct and more remote antecedents, and carrying forward into and affecting its immediate and more remote successors.

From a philosophical and radically empirical point of view, the Whitehead-based “concretual approximation,” which defines consciousness in concretual terms, arguably affords the best available analysis—perhaps the most fine-grained approximation possible—of the stream of consciousness. But how well does it sit with neuroscience, and neuroscience with it? Drawing on Edelman’s biological theory of consciousness, I outline a “neurobiological approximation” and demonstrate just how finely a Whitehead-based account of experience can mesh with a sophisticated neurobiological theory of consciousness. The Edelman-Whitehead correlations are striking, suggestive, and Jamesian in spirit. They arise from what may prove the most appealing piece of analysis in the book. I then argue for a form of monism that is opposed to familiar forms of dualism and materialism, as well as to the forms of “biological naturalism” espoused by Searle and Edelman.

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