

Week 7  
Chapter 7  
Essay 5

James's view of consciousness differed from Wundt. James argued the function of consciousness is to guide us to those ends required for survival, and without it human evolution could not have occurred. James rebelled against the artificiality and narrowness which Wundt stood by. He believed that conscious experiences are simply what they are and not groups or collections of elements as Wundt had claimed. The discovery of discrete elements of consciousness through introspective analysis does not show that these elements exist independently of a trained observer. A trained food taster or chef learns to discriminate individual elements in a flavor that might not be perceived by an untrained person. An untrained person experiences a fusion of flavor elements. A blend of ingredients not capable of analysis into elements. The fact that some trained observers can analyze their conscious experiences in a psychology lab does not mean that the elements they report are present in the consciousness of anyone else exposed to the same experience. Striking at the heart of Wundt's approach to psychology, James declared that simple sensations do not exist in conscious experience but exist only as a result of some convoluted process of inference or abstraction.

William James's idea that consciousness is a continuous flowing process and that any attempt to reduce it to elements will distort it. Because consciousness is always changing, we can never experience the same thought or sensation more than once. We may think about an object or stimulus on more than one occasion, but our thoughts each time will not be identical. Our consciousness can be described as cumulative not recurrent. The mind is also continuous with no sharp disruptions in the flow. We may notice gaps in time but on awakening we have no difficulty making connections with our ongoing stream of consciousness. James believed consciousness must have some biological utility or it would not have survived over time. The function of consciousness is to enable us to adapt to our environment by allowing us to choose. James distinguished between conscious choice and habit: he believed habits to be involuntary and nonconscious. When we encounter a new problem and need to choose a new way of coping, consciousness comes into play. This emphasis on purposefulness reflects the impact of evolutionary theory.