

HPch7essay

How did James's view of consciousness differ from Wundt's view? And what did James believe was the purpose of consciousness?

James considered Wundt's position on consciousness artificial and narrow. He disagreed on the idea of its' fragmented structure. According to James conscious experiences is simply what they are and could not be divided into elements. James argued that the discrete elements of consciousness discovered through introspection could not exist independently of a trained observer. The example of a chef as a trained food professional shows that extensive training allows a person to distinguish a great variety of flavors in food, while an untrained person experiences a mix of flavors and is not able to distinguish all the individual elements of the meal. For James the elements of the consciousness could only be identified by trained observers and didn't guarantee that someone else exposed to the same experience would report the same.

James stated that simple sensations didn't exist in conscious experience and only appeared as the result of complex process of inference or abstraction. Instead of artificial analysis and reduction of conscious experience into the elements James proposed a new program for psychology that focused on studying mental life as a constantly changing total experience. According to James thought or sensation can only be experienced ones since the consciousness is a continuous flow that cannot be divided into phases. Thus, James described consciousness as cumulative and not recurrent. James pointed out selective nature of the mind that is capable of paying attention to a part of experience or a stimuli to which it is exposed. The most important criterion of selection is relevance and based on it human mind is able to filter, combine and separate the experiences. Consciousness, according to James, allows us to adapt to the environment by letting us make choices. Following the idea of the adaptive function of the consciousness James distinguished between conscious choice and habit, where habit appeared to be involuntary and nonconscious and conscious was responsible for dealing with a new problem that required a new way of coping.

To sum up, James view on consciousness focused not only on the notion itself, but its' functionality. He emphasized the complexity of the stream of consciousness that could not be divided into elements to avoid its' distortion.