Consciousness as a pragmatist views it

I INTRODUCTION

There is, of course, no one way a pragmatist must view the nature and function of human consciousness. I'll be concerned in this essay with the way William James understood consciousness. James's struggles with the problem of consciousness provide I believe a compelling example of the pragmatic method at work, the method of trying to keep all the things we need to believe in play at once. This is no easy task since the things we need to believe typically represent the needs of different aspects of human life, of different human practices. There will be the things we need to believe for purposes of doing psychology, for living morally, for making life significant, and so on. And there is no guarantee that the things we find ourselves needing to believe will not compete. Indeed, allowing, even relishing, competition among different beliefs, the constant shifting back and forth, revising, dispelling appearances of inconsistencies, refining, and drawing together various pieces of a view of the world that works, that makes sense, as much sense as can be made from here-and-now, is what makes James such a compelling figure. His modus operandi is as visible in his work on consciousness as anywhere else in his philosophy.

Pragmatism is a method for doing what matters most: finding a way of believing, thinking, and being that will make life meaningful, that will make life worth living in the widest possible sense. Pragmatism involves first and foremost the intellectual virtues of honesty and humility.
II PLURALISM AND POINTS OF VIEW

James questioned the philosophical aspiration to find a single way of seeing the world and insists throughout his corpus that experience resists reductive unifying analysis. In the preface to The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy, James writes:

After all that reason can do has been done, there still remains the opacity of the finite facts as merely given, with most of their peculiarities mutually unmediated and unexplained. To the very last, there are various “points of view” which the philosopher must distinguish in discussing the world. . . . He who takes for his hypothesis the notion that [pluralism] is the permanent form of the world is what I call a radical empiricist. There is no possible point of view from which the world can appear an absolutely single fact. Real possibilities, real indeterminations, real beginnings, real ends, real evil, real crises, catastrophes, and escapes, a real God, and a real moral life, just as commonsense conceives these things, may remain in empiricism as conceptions which that philosophy gives up the attempt either to “overcome” or to reinterpret in monistic form.\textsuperscript{1} [WB, viii–ix]

The commitment to pluralism involved for James a commitment to the existence of different points of view that serve different purposes. It follows that we will not be able to understand James’s views on consciousness without paying close attention to the point of view from which he is speaking.

III NONNATURALISM

In the past, I have thought this emphasis on point of view permitted me to provide a reading of James’s theory of consciousness, based solely on the Principles of Psychology and Psychology: The Briefer Course, both written from the point of view of the empirical psychologist, as involving a consistent and farseeing naturalism. I have come to see that this cannot be done. There are parts of James’s overall philosophy that require him to resist naturalism, and even the texts written from the point of view of “psychology as a natural science” cannot, without a good deal of interpretive sleight of hand, be given a consistent naturalistic reading.\textsuperscript{2} What can be established, however, is that James was always searching for a way around substance dualism, a dualism he ambivalently adopted for methodologi-
Consciousness as a pragmatist views it

cal purposes in the Principles, but eventually saw his way out of in the Essays in Radical Empiricism. But even in the “Stream of Thought” chapter, written in 1884 – and thus one of the earliest pieces of the monumental project that became the Principles – we see ample evidence that James was struggling against substance dualism before completing the book in which he provisionally assumed this very form of dualism.

To prove my point, I discuss what seem to me to be several prima facie inconsistent texts devoted to the discussion of consciousness. The texts are the paired Principles of Psychology and its short and somewhat different version, Psychology: The Briefer Course, published in 1890 and 1892, respectively; the essays written between the early 1880s and the mid 1890s and collected in The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy, which was published in 1897; the 1898 Lecture on “Human Immortality”; and the essays “Does Consciousness Exist?” and “A World of Pure Experience,” written in 1904 and collected posthumously in the Essays in Radical Empiricism. Some of the prima facie inconsistent passages occur, as I have just suggested, within Principles themselves, so the interpretive problem does not occur simply among different texts, but also within them.

IV TEXTUAL INCOHERENCE?

The prima facie inconsistency among the texts is easy to see. In Principles, James writes that psychology is the science of “finite human minds” (PP, i:v), and that “Introspective Observation is what we have to rely on first and foremost and always. The word introspection need hardly be defined – it means of course, the looking into our own minds and reporting what we discover. Everyone agrees that we there discover states of consciousness” (PP, i:185).

In the essays collected in The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy, the dominant theme is that belief in freedom of the will – consciously orchestrated freedom of the will – is required to make life meaningful, whereas in the Principles we learn that psychology must assume determinism.

In the lecture on “Human Immortality,” published in 1898, James suggests that we assume that “Thought is a function of the brain” (ERM, 81). He then goes on to argue that this assumption creates no
obstacle to the doctrine that our conscious self "may still continue when the brain itself is dead" (ERM, 82). In effect, a science of finite human minds, which assumes that consciousness is functionally linked to the brain, is compatible with the thesis that after the functional link between brain and consciousness ceases to exist due to bodily death, consciousness may continue to exist for all eternity.

Finally, in the paper "Does Consciousness Exist?" published fourteen years after Principles and eight years after the lecture on "Human Immortality," James writes "[Consciousness] is the name of a non-entity, and has no right 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" (MEN, 169).

V CHANGING HIS MIND?

Taking these passages at face value suggests that the wisest tactic might be to simply assert that James changed his mind about consciousness or that he was inconsistent. Consciousness is the primary datum in Principles, but it goes the way of phlogiston in the Essays on Radical Empiricism. Psychology assumes determinism, but moral philosophy requires free will – an assertion made not only in most of the essays in The Will to Believe, but also in Psychology: The Briefer Course of 1892.

Consciousness is a property of finite minds with brains in Principles but can exist without the brain according to the view enunciated in "Human Immortality." Finally, personal immortality which involves my continued existence as a disembodied conscious self appears to require an assumption, the assumption that consciousness exists, which in the later work is seen to depend upon the silly adherence to an unwarranted posit – Consciousness – "a mere echo, the faint rumor left behind by the disappearing 'soul,' upon the air of philosophy."

Such are a few of the interpretive problems. I'll resist the tactic of arguing either that James changed his mind in any fundamental way about the nature and function of consciousness or that he was simply inconsistent. Whether I can succeed in giving a coherent non-naturalist reading remains for the reader to judge.
Consciousness as a pragmatist views it

VI THE PSYCHOLOGY

James writes in the "Preface" to the *Principles* that "I have kept close to the point of view of natural science throughout the book. . . . This book, assuming that thoughts and feelings exist and are vehicles of knowledge, thereupon contends that psychology when she has ascertained the empirical correlation of the various sorts of thought and feeling with definite conditions of the brain, can go no farther – can go no farther, that is, as a natural science. If she goes farther she becomes metaphysical" (*PP*, i:v–vi).

The first point to notice is that the point of view of natural science in the case of psychology is not one in which consciousness *is* a brain process. Consciousness is correlated with certain brain processes. The second point I want to insist on is this: For James, as for contemporary philosophers such as John Searle and Galen Strawson, the mind/body problem *is* the consciousness/brain problem. This is because the meaning of "mental" involves essentially the idea of experience. When we describe unconscious visual processes or the processes which get us from thinking to performing speech acts that express our thoughts as "mental processes," it is a sort of linguistic courtesy, akin to calling a boy a "young man." Unconscious visual processing is "mental" only in the sense that it takes place in or supervenes on brain processes and has some interesting relation to conscious visual experience. Getting the vocal apparatus to produce speech undoubtedly involves a complex set of neural processes, and typically saying what one intends involves consciousness of the beginning and the end of the process. But we are clueless about how saying what we mean happens.

Furthermore, there is nothing like a Freudian Unconscious in *Principles* – indeed, the possibility, insofar as it is entertained, is rejected. And although dissociative, disunified minds are discussed, as are cases of hysterical blindness, where, for example, the patient insists that she does not see anything, while evidence shows that she is seeing some things in her visual field, these are all explained in terms of what James called "secondary consciousness" – a variation on the theme, not something unconscious.

This much is secure – when James is concerned with the mind/body problem in the *Principles*, he is concerned with the problem of
consciousness – its nature, function, and relation to the brain and the rest of the body.

There are several deflationary views that James rejects on the mind/brain relation. What he calls the “automaton-theory” comes in two versions: an epiphenomenalist version and a parallelist version.

Epiphenomenalism is the theory that conscious mental life is a causally inconsequential byproduct, or side effect, of physical processes in our brains. James quotes Huxley’s startling version of epiphenomenalism:

The consciousness of brutes would appear to be related to the mechanism of their body simply as a collateral product of its working, and to be completely without any power of modifying that working, as the steam-whistle which accompanies the work of a locomotive engine is without influence upon its machinery. Their volition, if they have any, is an emotion indicative of physical changes, not a cause of such changes. . . . The soul stands to the body as the bell of a clock to the works, and consciousness answers to the sound which the bell gives out when it is struck . . . to the best of my judgment, the argumentation which applies to brutes holds equally good of men. . . . We are conscious automata. ([PP, i:13])

James aptly refers to the epiphenomenalist position as the “inert spectator” view of the mind.

The epiphenomenalist’s position is implausible, if not incoherent. First, assuming that epiphenomenalism is meant as a response to the interaction problem facing classical Cartesian dualism, it undermines its own rationale, which is to keep distinct metaphysical kinds from interacting, by allowing causal interaction between body and mind in one direction. On the epiphenomenalistic view, conscious mental states are the causal outcome of certain physical processes – the terminal side effects of biological processes. The epiphenomenalist, however, provides no intelligible reason as to why causality in the body/mind direction is any less problematic or worrisome than in the mind/body direction.

Alternatively, if we really take the locomotive engine-steam whistle analogy seriously we have no reason to think of conscious mental states in immaterial terms in the first place. A steam whistle’s “toot” is, after all, an utterly physical process. But if we are under no pressure to think of conscious mental states in nonphysical terms, then we have no metaphysical interaction problem to worry
about, and epiphenomenalism loses its appeal as a solution to that problem.

Furthermore, as soon as we take note of this fact that the epiphenomenalist position is compatible with consciousness being a physical process involving what we would nowadays call some sort of supervenience relation, it loses its status as a distinctive solution to the mind–body problem and becomes instead simply a particular theoretical position on the relative causal efficacy of the different physical components and processes that make up a person. On this interpretation, epiphenomenalism is the thesis that conscious mental life has the same incidental relation to the whole person as the steam whistle has to the locomotive engine.

To James such a view seems highly implausible on, as he puts it, "common-sensical" grounds. All the evidence points to conscious mental life as more analogous to the steam engine, which powers the locomotive and produces the steam, than to the quaint but terminal toot. James insists that epiphenomenalism is an "unwarrantable impertinence in the present state of psychology" (PP, 1:138).

Against the epiphenomenalist, James musters the commonsensical evidence that we often seem to bring about what we in fact mentally intend. He then joins this evidence to evolutionary theory, arguing that it is "inconceivable that consciousness should have nothing to do with a business which it so faithfully attends." And the question, "What has it to do?" is one which psychology has no right to "surmount," for it is her plain duty to consider it (PP, 1:136). James, however, immediately adds that "the whole question of interaction and influence between things is a metaphysical question about which we are entirely without knowledge."

The second type of "automaton-theory" is parallelism-with-an eliminativist-agenda. James describes the position this way:

If we knew thoroughly the nervous system of Shakespeare, and as thoroughly all his environing conditions, we should be able to show why at a certain period of his life his hand came to trace on certain sheets of paper those crabbed little marks which we for shortness' sake call the manuscript of Hamlet. We should understand . . . all this without in the slightest degree acknowledging the existence of thoughts in Shakespeare's mind. But, on the other hand, nothing in all this could prevent us from giving an equally complete account of . . . Shakespeare's spiritual history, an account in which gleam of thought and emotion should find its place. The mind history
would run alongside the body-history of each man, and each point in the one would correspond to, but not react upon, a point in the other. [PP, 1:136–7]

This sort of parallelism is logically identical to the sort of parallelism familiar from the writings of Leibniz and Malebranche. But Leibniz and Malebranche proposed their somewhat different forms of the doctrine in an attempt to solve the problem of interaction between the two distinct metaphysical kinds that Cartesianism requires, while at the same time maintaining the metaphysical and explanatory primacy of mentalistic explanation.

The sort of parallelism James takes as his target sees the possibility of parallel, but distinct, mental and physical stories as warranting the elimination of the mental story from science.

Why would one favor the elimination of the mentalistic story? Mental phenomena are metaphysically spooky, ontologically orthogonal to the materialistic perspective dominating the rest of the natural sciences, and thus worth eliminating. Furthermore, parsimony favors eliminating one of two stories supposing both have equal explanatory power, especially when one is metaphysically weird.

As with all positions on the mind/body problem, James acknowledges that parallelism cannot be straightforwardly proved or disproved. But parallelism has several worrisome features. First, there is the unyielding puzzle as to why there are these two utterly independent but parallel chains of events – itself a metaphysically odd state of affairs. No less odd, after all, than if the two metaphysically distinct kinds interacted. Second, there is the puzzle as to how the two chains keep their perfect symmetry. The only decent answer to this question ever proposed in the philosophical literature has been theological: God flawlessly orchestrates the parallel symmetry – either by setting the mental and physical streams in harmony at the point of creation or birth [Leibniz] or by maintaining the harmony on each and every occasion [Malebranche]. The first kind of parallelism might be dubbed "deistic parallelism," the second "pantheistic parallelism."

Perhaps parallelism finesses the interaction problem. Still, even as God is invoked, it looks as if parallelism must be a deterministic doctrine. God does all the work of keeping mental events and bodily events in harmony, and both the mental and the bodily paths look
Consciousness as a pragmatist views it

*prima facie* to be deterministic. It is not as if I ever truly *choose* any sequence of acts along the mental path, nor that I ever *choose* to perform any bodily movements.

Determinism to one side, even on the supposition that there might be two utterly distinct stories about Shakespeare’s writing of *Hamlet*, one the story of the mental sequence, the other of the coordinated sequence of bodily movements, this fact hardly favors elimination of the mental story. The reason is simple. The two stories do not explain the same phenomena. Eliminating the mental account of Shakespeare’s composition of *Hamlet* eliminates something fundamental that is in need of explanation, namely, the intentional character of Shakespeare’s production of *Hamlet* and our intentional appropriation of the written play as about what it is about. Surely from a physical point of view this play called *Hamlet* is just a series of ink marks on paper, but to Shakespeare and to us it is a story, a meaningful intentional object. Any analysis of a significant human act framed totally in the languages of the natural sciences, neuroscience included, will fail to capture certain facts related to the meaning and significance of that act. A science of mind may well require different levels of description, some intentional, some not, in order to answer different explanatory questions. But even on parallelist assumptions, the purely physical chain of events hardly explains the same thing as the mental chain does.

For James, the fundamental flaw of parallelism runs even deeper. It is the same as the epiphenomenalist’s, namely, the evidence for interaction is overwhelming. It is simply too implausible to assume that Shakespeare’s decision to write a play was not causally related to his taking pen in hand, but rather that the two events, the decision to write a play and the movements of his hand over paper, just happened to coincide!

Dewey (“The Vanishing Subject,” 1940) claimed that James himself was a parallelist. But James’s parallelism and his commitment to what he called the “pre-established harmony” between Object and Subject is, as best I can discern, epistemic, not metaphysical, or possibly a confused admixture of the two. The “thoroughgoing dualism” James insists is the psychologist’s starting point involves, in the first instance, a distinction between the cognizing organism and the things-it-knows. After James quotes a long passage from Borden Parker Browne in which sense data are introduced as an intermedi-
ary between the cognizing subject and the things in the world, he makes the odd and textually singular assertion about the need to assume a "dualism of Object and Subject and their pre-established harmony" (PP, 1:218–21). These words invoke the specter of parallelism. But in context, I claim the best interpretation is that James was thinking here of "pre-established harmony" as involving the generally well coordinated links between knower and known, the fact that the world somehow has evolved to put the metaphysically distinct relata of mind, brain, and external world into such relations that "willing" and "knowing" can occur.

James often makes the point that we must assume that for every mental event there exists a brain correlate. But this doctrine does not require advocacy of any traditional form of parallelism. To be sure, the correlations are brute and provide no warrant for identifying the mental with the neural—as for example some sort of identity theory or double aspect theory might do. Nonetheless, mental events and neural events interact in both directions. My seeing you will be correlated with neural event \( n \), both at time \( t \); but if when I see you, I then decide to tell you a juicy piece of gossip, that decision at \( t' \), which will also have its own neural correlate at \( t'' \), will temporally precede my speech act which it will cause at \( t'' \).

In the Principles, James also considers a Master Homunculus Theory, a sort of Consciousness as CEO model. This model comes in two varieties: a materialist version and a spiritualist version. The materialist proposes that there exists "among the cells one central or pontifical one to which our consciousness is attached" (PP, 1:179).

James objects to this brazen materialistic tactic of claiming the existence of a physical location for our mental masterworks on the grounds that there is absolutely no physical evidence that there is any one such place in the brain. "There is no cell or group of cells in the brain of such anatomical or functional preeminence as to appear to be the keystone or centre of gravity of the whole system" (PP, 1:180).

Waiting in the wings, of course, is our old friend the Cartesian, who holds what James calls the "spiritual monad theory." He holds that every remotely plausible theory of the mind requires the existence of a Master Homunculus who comprehends and orchestrates the goings-on of the cognitive system. The Cartesian insists that because there is no evidence that this Master Homunculus is located
Consciousness as a pragmatist views it

in the two and one-half pounds of gray matter between our ears, we are logically compelled to assume that it exists nonphysically – as an immaterial *soul* or *thinking substance*.

James is very much attracted to the spiritual monad view although he sees ways the psychologist can avoid committing himself to it. First, the Cartesian can produce no direct empirical evidence for his immaterialist hypothesis. Therefore, his theory must have either strong intuitive, introspective, and phenomenological warrant, or it must have logic and parsimony on its side. But James insists it does not have the former since we do not ever introspect a Cartesian *soul* – even less so a *pure immutable ego*. Rather we introspect our ordinary everyday self thinking. So, Cartesianism fails the introspective test one would expect to be its primary warrant.

What about its warrant on grounds of logic and parsimony? Not surprisingly, given what I’ve said so far, James brushes away standard worries about interaction between two metaphysically different kinds of substances on the grounds, *pace* Hume, that all causality is completely mysterious (*PP*, 1:181).

James writes, “the only trouble that remains to haunt us is the metaphysical one of understanding how one sort of world or existent thing can affect or influence another at all. This trouble, however, since it also exists inside of both worlds, and involves neither physical improbability nor logical contradiction, is relatively small. [I] confess, therefore, that to posit a soul influenced in some mysterious way by the brain-states and responding to them by conscious affections of its own, seems to me the line of least logical resistance, so far as we have yet attained” (*PP*, 1:181). But once again James reminds us that in fact we do not experience a “soul,” but only states of consciousness. Believing in a soul that orchestrates mental and bodily life is an option, but psychology may, for its purposes, be able to do with less.

This suggestion is developed in the “Stream of Thought” chapter which was written in 1884, although not published in the *Principles* until 1890. James says here, and in the next chapter, “The Consciousness of Self,” that the thoughts themselves are the thinkers. I am a cognitive creature or, if this is too materialistic a way of putting things, I am a unified thinking thing. This is enough to explain why I have my own experiences, and not yours. Thinking or experiencing are powerfully appropriative. So my thinking now carries its past to
itself, a past that gives my thinking, texture, richness, and meaning. Furthermore, I have been led to construct concepts of “me,” “myself” and “I.” These are useful ways of conceiving of me or of what-is-happening-here or of different ways of the stream of consciousness appropriating itself from different vantage points. But what these pronouns pick out is not a substantial Cartesian mind nor a Kantian transcendental ego, but this metaphysically complex organism, this subject of experience, appropriated in different reflexive ways. These themes about the constructive quality of pronouns, of different ways of conceiving of the self (in bodily, psychological, or social terms), of the idea that consciousness is an entity, and of the distinctions between mental states and physical ones are key to the later writings on neutral monism.

We have experiences which we then categorize and parse. On what basis do we categorize and parse? On the basis of human interactions—some with world-historical force behind them—revealed in the languages we are taught, prior common sense, and philosophizing—and some that are called for by our time-and-place, our unique situation in the world.

VII EVOLUTION

It might be thought that reading James as a nonnaturalist, as a dualist of some sort, is in tension with (indeed, incompatible with) his Darwinism. It seems right to think that James’s commitment to Darwin’s theory of evolution required him to provide a theory of the nature and function of conscious mental life that explained how it could be the adaptive, causally efficacious trait he thought it was. But it might seem that James’s view in Principles that consciousness is immaterial is incompatible with Darwinism. There may be ways around this problem, even as Darwinism has developed in our time. Let me explain. Nature selects what it can see. What she sees is reproductive success. Reproductively successful organisms get to pass on their traits, which results in increased frequency of the traits that lead to success. Now if Homo sapiens happen to have developed the quirky, hard-to-understand capacity to “load the dice,” to select courses of action by conscious will, to broadcast information of important events to self and other, then they will do well in the struggle to survive. But here one might think the following problem will prove
Consciousness as a pragmatist views it

insuperable: we need to understand the process of the transmission and maintenance of consciousness within the species. Nature does not see consciousness. She cannot. She only sees the effects that consciousness reliably produces and that are implicated in reproductive success. So long as consciousness is linked to the production of the relevant effects, there is no problem in there being selection pressures for consciousness. Unless, that is, consciousness is immaterial. Nowadays, we would say that if there are genes that select for consciousness and if creatures with consciousness behave in reproductively successful ways, then the genes that select for consciousness will increase in frequency, or maintain themselves as characteristic of the species. The problem is this: How does selection of phenotypic traits such as the behaviors or traits that are thought to be caused by consciousness, that is, by selective attention, capacities to do what one intends, to “load the dice,” and the like, also select for what produces these behaviors and traits, unless what produces the behaviors and traits is linked to what we now call “genes”? Selection pressures operate on sperm and ova and what we have come to think they carry – genetic material.

Although I personally do not find this response appealing, James could maintain the immateriality of mind and the idea that there were powerful selective pressures pulling for it. First, there is his ever-ready argument about our fundamental ignorance about causality. We do not know – may never know – how causality works. But if we are dualists who believe in the interaction of the mental and physical in the domain of mind/brain relations, there is no internal incoherence in believing that evolution also operates over the mental and the physical. We happen to understand only the mechanisms governing the physical transmission. But either our ignorance or God can be left to do some work.

Alternatively, one could opt for the standard, purely physicalist, theory of selection and maintain that certain genes, once on-line, have as emergent properties the production of a mysteriously causally efficacious immaterial mind. James’s acceptance of the Humean doctrine that all causality is mysterious gives him lots of room to operate.

I will conclude this section with this claim: In Principles James was a dualist. His dualism involved a commitment to interaction between the mental and the physical. It follows that all the state-
ments about psycho-physical correlations need to be taken, not as support for any kind of parallelism, but as involving the belief that for each token mental event, there will be a corresponding brain event (probably not the other way around). Finally, the sort of dualistic interactionism that James accepts in *Principles* is ambivalently Cartesian, an ambivalent form of substance dualism. The ambivalence shows up in many places, especially in the passages in the “Stream of Thought” and “Consciousness of Self” chapters where the view that will be adopted later that “consciousness is not a thing” begins to reveal itself.

**VIII Voluntarism**

One reason James is not — indeed, cannot be — a naturalist has to do with his commitment to voluntarism. James either did not understand compatibilism or else he did not respect it as a solution to the free will/determinism problem — possibly both. For him, two live options existed: a libertarian conception of free will and hard determinism. The meaning of life was at stake, not just the prospects for a scientific psychology. Meanwhile, James insisted that scientific psychology must assume determinism.

When James says the psychology must assume determinism what exactly does he mean? One thing he most certainly thinks is that each token mental event has a brain correlate, possibly one to which it appears to have a necessary connection (such connections, once again, however, bespeak “constant connection,” and apparent necessary causality, but are, at root, mysterious). But in the second place, since consciousness can load the dice and influence the direction of bodily action, he must mean that we should assume that whatever laws describe this interaction will be deterministic.

Why think this? One possibility is that assuming determinism might make discovery of whatever sort of lawlike generalizations psychology might eventually yield more probable, even if these generalizations turn out to be nondeterministic — even if determinism is false. The idea is similar to the idea that if I assume I will one day become rich, I may be more careful than I would otherwise have been with my investments and in this way become wealthier than I would have been had I not made this assumption, even if I never do become rich by any measure.
Consciousness as a pragmatist views it

Still one might wonder about the plausibility of making even the regulative assumption that the laws of psychology, if there are such laws, will be deterministic, when already in James's philosophy is the assumption that we have free will. To stick with the example of my financial future, it seems like assuming that I could become rich even in a situation where I had independent reason to believe that no one can ever become rich. Am I not doing something odd, if I look for what I know, on other grounds, cannot be found? James gives no answer to these questions.

One possibility is that he thought that psychology cannot get behind consciously initiated action; but that if it allows its generalizations to start with consciously generated actions, it might end up with deterministic laws linking conscious will with action: "If a person P consciously decides to do x, and there are no obstacles to her doing x, she will do x." To the further question: "Why did P decide to do x!" two answers suggest themselves: "P just decided, it was a matter of free will"; or, if this seems like stonewalling, we might advert to the realm of reasons that are distinct from causes to rationalize P's choice, but not causally explain it.

Another possibility is that James found the state-of-the-art reassuring. The sort of law mentioned above will, in fact, be nondeterministic, wearing various ceteris paribus clauses on its sleeve. So long as psychology had not discovered any laws, the deterministic assumption is truly regulative, not constitutive – in a way, I think it could not be conceived if physics were the science under discussion. In the epilogue to his Psychology: The Briefer Course, published two years after Principles, James writes:

When we talk of "psychology as a natural science," we must not assume that that means a sort of psychology that stands at last on solid ground. It means just the reverse; it means a psychology particularly fragile, and into which the waters of metaphysical criticism leak at every joint, a psychology all of whose elementary assumptions and data must be reconsidered in wider connections ... it is strange to hear people talk of "the New Psychology" ... when into the real elements and forces which the word covers not the first glimpse of clear insight exists. A string of raw facts; a little gossip and wrangle about opinions; a little classification and generalization on the mere descriptive level ... but not a single law in the sense in which physics shows us laws, not a single proposition from which any consequence can causally be deduced. ... This is no science, it is only the hope of a science.
James then repeats in the last sentence of the book the caveat that “the natural science assumptions with which we started are provisional and revisable things” \cite{PB, 334–5}. Restricting natural science assumptions to the discovery of psycho-physical correlations, not one of which has yet yielded a genuinely predictive law, explains in part why James felt perfectly comfortable saying only a few paragraphs earlier:

Let psychology frankly admit that for her scientific purposes determinism may be claimed, and no one can find fault. . . . Now ethics makes a counter-claim; and the present writer, for one, has no hesitation in regarding her claim as the stronger, and in assuming that our wills are “free” . . . the deterministic assumption of psychology is merely provisional and methodological \cite{PB, 328}.

This passage is emblematic of a certain sort of move characteristic of James’s philosophy. First, there is the idea that points of view can be in competition. Inconsistency is, however, avoided by noting the provisionality or methodological nature of certain points of view.

James often speaks as if all points of view are equally partial, provisional, interest relative, fallible, and so on. But sometimes there is a moment when he stands by metaphysics or morals and gives them final authority, the last say – a point at which he allows them to assert a view that is not merely provisional or methodological, but true. Second, free will and consciousness are deeply connected in James’s thought since “consciousness” is causally efficacious in willing – it “loads the dice.” Third, we know from the corpus and every biography of James that he was obsessed with the problem of freedom of the will. The discussion of free will in Principles \cite{PP, 2:572} – “the question of free will is insoluble on strictly psychologic grounds” – resonates with, indeed almost duplicates, the line of argument in the famous papers from the mid-1880s collected in The Will to Believe where James argues from the premises that philosophical arguments for or against God and free will are inconclusive, and that belief in God and free will contribute to a meaningful life while atheism and determinism undermine meaning, to the conclusion that believing in God and free will are warranted, all things considered. In the work on immortality, James is clear that even if a brain/body are necessary for consciousness to appear as it does for embodied beings, it does not follow that con-
Consciousness as a pragmatist views it

Consciousness, identity, and their suite require a brain or a body. Belief in personal immortality, like the belief in free will and God, are options for philosophically honest persons trying to find the beliefs that will support a meaningful life.

It is not clear that the position James takes on points of view is stable. So long as psychology contains not one predictive law, the provisional deterministic assumption can hardly claim to be the point of view that best captures the nature of all things. What is less clear is how one could resist giving this provisional assumption more than provisional weight if it worked to yield an explanatory and predictive science of the mind. If one starts to give two competing views more than provisional or methodological weight, it is hard to see how one will keep from courting inconsistency. One will surely court some sort of cognitive dissonance.

IX MY IMMORTAL SOUL

As I have just indicated, in the lecture on “Human Immortality,” James complicates matters further. He writes, “For the purposes of my argument, now, I wish to adopt this general doctrine as if it were established absolutely, with no possibility of restriction. During this hour I wish you also to accept it as a postulate, whether you think it incontrovertibly established or not; so I beg you to agree with me to-day in subscribing to the great psycho-physiological formula: Thought is a function of the brain” (ERM, 81).

He then asks whether this doctrine logically compels us to reject the idea of personal immortality and answers, “no.” James’s reasoning requires distinguishing three different kinds of function, and thus three different ways we might understand the thesis that “Thought is a function of the brain.” There are, first, productive functions, as operate when a hot kettle produces steam. Second, there are releasing or permissive functions. “The trigger of a crossbow has a releasing function: it removes the obstacle that holds the string, and lets the bow fly back to its natural shape” (ERM, 85). Third, there are transmissive functions. Light hits a prism and surprising colors are transmitted; an organ transmits sounds.

Once the distinctions are in place, James says: “My thesis now is this: that, when we think the law that thought is a function of the brain, we are not required to think of productive function only; we
are entitled also to consider permissive or transmissive function" [ERM, 86].

I don’t claim to completely understand the distinctions, but it is clear in the lecture that James intends something like the following proposal. If all functions are “productive” then to say that thought is a function of the brain is tantamount to asserting that thought cannot exist without the brain. Brains produce thoughts. They are the only things that produce thoughts; and when the brain dies, so dies thought.

On the other hand, if thought is a function of the brain in the sense that for embodied beings the brain permits and/or transmits thought, if it is a conduit more than a producer, then there is no incoherence in the idea that thought, including the stream of thought, can be [1] of a different metaphysical kind than the brain, which [2] interacts with the brain while we are alive, and that [3] absorbs and retains the identity, personality, and memories constitutive in this interaction, and finally [4] can continue to go on without the brain.

To take the metaphor literally requires thinking something like this: whereas only boiling water produces steam, prismatic arrays and music, despite requiring prisms and musical instruments in the actual world, can possibly exist without that which typically permits or transmits them.

James writes, “when finally a brain stops acting altogether, or decays, that special stream of consciousness which it subserved will vanish entirely from this natural world. But the sphere of being that supplied the consciousness would still be intact; and in that more real world with which, even whilst here, it was continuous, the consciousness might, in ways unknown to us, continue still” [ERM, 87].

X POSSIBILITY

I will only add this much: James is right. All this is possible. Someone, possibly most modernists or postmodernists or whatever it is we now allegedly are, will think it old-fashioned and improbable. What James shows [to his great credit, I think] is that when one takes as the data all that experience has thus far offered and will offer down the road, the concept of old-fashioned might find its place, but what is more or less probable is an utterly obscure notion. Peirce’s
Consciousness as a pragmatist views it

cancept of what we will be warranted to assert at the end of inquiry is just one way of alerting us to the fact that assertions of what is probable now can at most take account of a small portion of actual and possible experience. How partial, like how probable, is something we cannot say. But humility is in order.

XI CONSCIOUSNESS: EPISTEMOLOGICAL NOT METAPHYSICAL

The last texts I will consider in this essay are from the Essays in Radical Empiricism. These, more than any other essays in the corpus, are thought to express a change in James’s position about the nature of consciousness. My view, as I said at the start, is that they express the culmination of two decades worth of thinking that there was something wrong with substance dualism, and possibly with dualism, generally. In “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” James admits that for over twenty years, and therefore before the writing of Principles, he had “mistrusted ‘consciousness’ as an entity” (ERE, 4). What could this mean? James answers, “I mean only to deny that the word stands for an entity, but to insist more emphatically that it stands for a function” (ERE, 4). Part of the general motivation is to provide a route away from substance dualism, and indeed from a host of other closely related posits. The postulation of mental and physical substance is a construct, as is the metaphysical distinction between object and subject, especially the objective and subjective worlds. There are powerful historical pressures that incline us to adopt these distinctions in their standard forms, but the pragmatic value of these dualisms and distinctions, once reexamined, suggest that their cash-value is overrated.

James has two arguments for his view. One I like, the other I do not. First, the one I do not like. It consists in the articulation of what Russell called “neutral monism.” James writes: “‘Pure experience’ is the name [for] . . . the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories. Only new-born babes, or men in semi-coma from sleep, drugs, illnesses, or blows, may be assumed to have an experience pure in the literal sense of a that which is not yet a definitive what” (ERE, 46).

This statement is from a 1905 essay. But in both Principles of 1890 and Psychology: The Briefer Course of 1892, James speaks of the
mental life of infants and makes a similar point. Infants do not take metaphysical positions, they do not divide the world into mental and material substance, possibly not even into me and not-me, and perhaps they lack concepts altogether. Something like this is true even for noninfants — us grown-ups, although our conceptual apparatus is so near at hand that we lose sight of the fact that we first have experiences, and then and only then put them into compartments, into worlds — mental-physical, real-unreal, and so on.

Such an experience as blue, as it is immediately given, can only be called by some such neutral name as that phenomenon. It does not come to us immediately as a relation between two realities, one mental and one physical. It is only when still thinking of it as the same blue . . . that it doubles itself, so to speak, and develops in two directions; and, taken in connection with some associates, figures as a physical quality, whilst with others it figures as a feeling of mind. (PB, 332)

Experiences occur, and then practical needs and existing social and linguistic practices guide us to construct the concepts of inner and outer, mind and matter, consciousness and content. James insisted on this point from 1890 on. What is different about the post-1904 work is that he seems — or has been so interpreted — to want to take this phenomenological fact as having metaphysical significance, that is, as showing something about what is ontologically basic. If we are radical empiricists then we will insist that both mind and matter are constructs. Pure experience, which is neutral between the two, is primordial.

I'm not convinced that neutral monism should be read as an ontological as opposed to an epistemic or psychological doctrine. But assuming it is intended ontologically, then I think there is a mistake, a form of the genetic fallacy, mistaking what comes first or early in the order of experience as having ontological bearing. Pragmatism, I would have thought, is a wait-and-see approach.

The metaphysical reading is one way to read the argument for neutral monism. And if this way of reading James is right, then he makes the mistake of thinking, something he insists we should not think, that the way things seem has obvious or significant metaphysical import. The argument, interpreted as moving from the atheoretical experience of the uninitiated to a metaphysical conclusion, requires something like the assumption that ontology recapitu-
Consciousness as a pragmatist views it

lates ontogeny. This does not seem to me to be a good premise to implicitly import—no matter where one is coming from.

James might be completely correct that what he calls “pure experience” is what phenomenology reveals as primordial, both in the infant’s case and in the noninfant’s case when as adults we can bracket out our weighty conceptual baggage. But being right about that has no consequences whatsoever for what is metaphysically basic. Neutral monism makes sense as phenomenology—quite possibly the primacy of “pure experience,” if true, has some epistemological significance. But as far as I can tell such phenomenological primacy carries no ontological weight. James writes in “La Notion de Conscience,” one of the essays collected in the Essays in Radical Empiricism, that:

Les attributions sujet et objet, représenté et représentatif, chose et pensée, signifient donc une distinction pratique qui est de la dernière importance, mais qui est d’ordre FONCTIONNEL seulement, et nullement ontologique comme le dualisme classique représente. [ERE, 117]

Even if all these distinctions are functional, not ontological, it does not follow that what presents itself as functionally undivided is ontologically basic. Assuming this is the doctrine, then this is what I do not like about the papers in which neutral monism is defended. Hopefully, I have put my finger on the logical mistake being made—so that this is not simply an issue about taste.

What I like about the papers is something altogether different; and I think what I like is something that has no important conceptual connection to neutral monism. What is it?

It is the doctrine that consciousness is not a thing, a substance, or an entity. Consciousness does not belong on our list of first principles as a substance—either as immaterial substance or as a faculty of the brain. Once James announces his rejection of the idea that consciousness is a thing, he immediately adds, so as to correct the impression that he now thinks of consciousness as akin to phlogiston or the ether, that “thoughts undeniably exist...there is a function in experience which thoughts perform...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 out” [ERE, 4].
I will have to explain what I think James means here in a nutshell since exegesis of these late metaphysical writings is a topic in itself. First, nothing in Essays in Radical Empiricism suggests that James is an eliminativist about conscious experience. Experience, as I said at the beginning, is for James what we would now just call "conscious experience"—although it is not clear now, just as it was not clear then, that there is a contrastive category of "unconscious experiences" to call attention to. Second, James’s belief that things get reported and are known does not require the posit of a faculty of consciousness, immaterial or material. Experiences will do. What will happen, and this is the third point, is that our experiences will relate in ways that typically lead to the constructions of certain distinctions, for example, between what is mental and nonmental. But this distinction can be made without commitment to some essential underlying ontological difference. It can be like the distinction between up and down, in and out, and the like. Fourth, this pragmatically motivated distinction will lead to a distinction among experiences, events, things—I do not care what you call them—with different causal properties. We will learn that “mental water” does not put out “fire” whereas “water” does. We will learn that attention and concentration help to solve arithmetic problems on paper. When distinction making ensues—and it is guaranteed to be supported, but not always most wisely, by the community which participates in the project of interpreting our “pure experiences”—we are then engaged in the lifelong project of knowing, conceiving, and thinking of the world in ways that seem, indeed that might truly be, useful. But opportunities for mistakes abound. One mistake we might make is the one James made in thinking that substance dualism had to be assumed for the sake of doing scientific psychology, namely, giving too much weight to previous philosophizing and to common sense. Whitehead called this sort of mistake “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.” One makes into a thing or an entity something that reveals itself vividly and powerfully. Why do we do this? Perhaps, in the case of thinking of consciousness as an entity or a thing, there is the combined weight of the philosophical tradition which has pretty much cleared only this path, as well as certain tendencies of thought that Homo sapiens are prone to. This is not a line James took, but Quine has suggested, and I agree, that we go for physical hunks over time slices and undetached parts when individ-
Consciousness as a pragmatist views it

Evaluating things. It would not be particularly surprising if either natural tendencies or some sort of metaphorical extension from the normal physical case led to reification when doing mental individuation.

XII C'EST FINI

One must stop somewhere and sometime. I choose now. William James is my favorite philosopher. There is almost no view he holds that I agree with. But this is not because I think his arguments are generally bad. I would prefer that James believed in compatibilism, that he saw the possibility that some "mental" events might be conscious, and that those that are might have causal powers, distinct from those that do not possess the relevant property. I wish he did not, if he did, hold neutral monism as a metaphysical thesis and several other things, too. Why do I love him? Let me count the ways? Not enough space or time. Simply put, the attraction of James the philosopher is that he is to me the best example I know of a person doing philosophy; there is no hiding the person behind the work, no way of discussing the work without the person, no way to make believe that there is a way to do philosophy that is not personal. Furthermore, the problems that absorbed, possibly obsessed, James are good problems to worry about. What are experiences? What capacities does a creature for whom there is something it is like to be that creature have that an automaton lacks? How do such concepts as agency, self, free action, and the like fit with the effort to develop a scientific psychology, and, most importantly of all, what makes life worth living? James never let these questions drop off the agenda in an effort to focus his efforts on giving a picture of only a piece of the world. He wanted and worked at a picture of the whole thing.

Most child psychologists now think that James was wrong in thinking that the world of the infant is a "blooming, buzzing confusion." I have come to think that for William James, the philosopher and the man, experience almost certainly seemed this way. His greatness as a philosopher and as a person comes from allowing this "blooming, buzzing confusion" to continually present itself to himself. No experience is to be disallowed; everything is to be attended to, even if not accounted for; and all the interests and projects we have as conscious beings are to be taken seriously. For James, the philosopher
and the man, this attitude brought with it no small amount of intellectual and personal trouble. But it makes him at the same time a model for philosophers even today, a worthy model, indeed.

NOTES

1 One might think that it is a characteristic feature of pragmatism that it will resist any totalizing view – naturalistic or nonnaturalistic, that it must be pluralistic in the sense James describes in this passage above. But I do not think this is right, since Dewey and Quine are pragmatists who are also thoroughgoing naturalists, whereas Goodman and Hilary Putnam are pragmatists who are pluralists.

2 I am grateful to W. E. Cooper (1990) for an excellent and decisive critique of my attempt to provide a consistent naturalistic reading even of the purely psychological works. Cooper’s essay abounds with insights about the difficulty of interpreting James’s theory of mind. Not only does my own naturalistic reading require correction, but so too do neutral monist, panpsychist, and protophenomenological readings, according to Cooper. I am extremely grateful to him for his extremely patient, thoughtful, and scholarly essay.

3 In case anyone is wondering, this is still true. No respectable neuroscientist is looking for some “Holy Seat” in brain tissue (which, by the way, is different from looking for characteristic neural patterns that might subserve conscious experiences – this is very much the game as I write).