THE STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS (1892)

William James

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.

In considering these four points successively, we shall have to plunge in medias res as regards our nomenclature

and use psychological terms which can only be adequately defined in later chapters of the book. But every one knows what the terms mean in a rough way; and it is only in a rough way that we are now to take them. This chapter is like a painter's first charcoal sketch upon his canvas, in which no niceties appear.

[Personal Nature of Consciousness]

When I say every "state" or "thought" is part of a personal consciousness, "personal consciousness" is one of the terms in question. Its meaning we know so long as no one asks us to define it, but to give an accurate account of it is the most difficult of philosophic tasks. This task we must, confront in the next chapter; here a preliminary word will suffice.

In this room — this lecture-room, say — there are a multitude of thoughts, yours and mine, some of which cohere mutually, and some not. They are as little each-for-itself and reciprocally independent as they are all-belonging-together. They are neither: no one of them is separate, but each belongs with certain others and with none beside. My thought belongs with my other thoughts, and your thought with your other thoughts. Whether anywhere in the room there be a mere thought, which is nobody's thought, we have no means of ascertaining, for we have no experience of its like. The only states of consciousness that we naturally deal with are found in personal consciousness, minds, selves, concrete particular I's and you's.

Each of these minds keeps its own thoughts to itself. There is no giving or bartering between them. No thought even comes into direct sight of a thought in another personal consciousness than its own. Absolute insulation, irreducible pluralism, is the law. It seems as if the elementary psychic fact were not thought or this thought

or that thought, but my thought, every thought being owned. Neither contemporaneity, nor proximity in space, nor similarity of quality and content are able to fuse thoughts together which are sundered by this barrier of belonging to different personal minds. The breaches between such thoughts are the most absolute breaches in nature. Every one will recognize this to be true, so long as the existence of something corresponding to the term "personal mind" is all that is insisted on, without any particular view of its nature being implied. On these terms the personal self rather than the thought might be treated as the immediate datum in psychology. The universal conscious fact is not "feelings and thoughts exist," but "I think" and "I feel." No psychology, at any rate, can question the existence of personal selves. Thoughts connected as we feel them to be connected are what we mean by personal selves. The worst a psychology can do is so to interpret the nature of these selves as to rob them of their worth.