Readers of Henry and William James have often observed that while Henry wrote novels like a psychologist, William wrote psychology like a novelist. Numerous critics have studied the influence of William’s professional disciplines, psychology and philosophy, on the fictional writings of his brother Henry. While I am following these critics in attending to Henry James’ broad concern with depicting consciousness, I am focusing more narrowly on his specific but no less persistent concern with the distinction between thought and ideas. T. S. Eliot famously described Henry James as a man with “a mind so fine that no idea could violate it,” and while this description is occasionally quoted, it has never been adequately explained, let alone tested. None of the scholars who takes up the topic of James’ indebtedness to philosophy and psychology has had much to say about Eliot’s observation or about his distinction between thought and idea, although it was an important (if unexpressed) concern for Henry James as well as for this most discerning critic. Most critics who respond to Eliot’s comment, in fact, have typically misunderstood it as an insult. But the statement was high if eccentric praise from Eliot, whose graduate work was in philosophy and whose distinction between “ideas” and “thought” requires careful attention to elucidate properly. Here is Eliot’s comment in context:

James’ critical genius comes out most tellingly in his mastery over, his baffling escape from, Ideas; a mastery and an escape which are perhaps the last test of a superior intelligence. He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it . . . . In England, ideas run wild and pasture on the emotions; instead of thinking with our feelings (a very different thing) we corrupt our feelings with ideas; we produce the public, the
politiccal, the emotional idea, evading sensation and thought. . . .
Mr. Chesterton’s brain swarms with ideas; I see no evidence that it
thinks. James in his novels is like the best French critics in maintaining
a point of view, a view-point untouched by the parasite idea. He is the
most intelligent man of his generation. (The Little Review 1918)

For Eliot, the practice of “thinking with our feelings” was altogether
too rare; the “parasite idea” was too often allowed to corrupt or
occlude “sensation and thought.”

What did Eliot mean by this distinction between thought and
ideas, and would it be wrongheaded to turn to philosophy to discover
the clue not only to Eliot’s criticism but also to James’ depictions of
consciousness? Henry James, unlike T. S. Eliot, never studied philos-
ophy, although he was an avid and eclectic reader who enthusiastically
read most of his brother William’s writings. He never studied the tra-
dition of “ideas” in Western philosophy—a tradition that begins with
Plato’s forms and assumes a number of very different incarnations,
as diverse as the thing that evolves from “impressions” in empiricist
thought and the substance of all matter in Hegel’s system of world
history. We do know, however, that some of this tradition made its
way into his consciousness, not only as an adult when he was read-
ing his brother’s published works on philosophy and psychology, but
still earlier when he was a young man growing up in Cambridge and
hearing the debates about idealism that transpired in that intellectual
community.

Henry James’ brother William came to hate the idealism that
both boys learned at their father’s knee. For William James, writing
later in Pragmatism, abstract ideas were scarcely distinguish-
able from ideology, the use of an abstract principle that tends to
override all contradictory empirical evidence. William derided such
abstractions—what he called “rationalism”—in his groundbreaking
philosophical study. Rationalism, he claimed, “lose[s] contact with
the concrete parts of life” (13), forcing all experience into a single
model of truth. To be sure, the philosopher recognized the allure
of this model. Writing in A Pluralistic Universe, he observed that
philosophers “have substituted economical and orderly concep-
tions for the first sensible tangle [of experience]; and whether these
were morally elevated or only intellectually neat, they were at any
rate always aesthetically pure and definite, and aimed at ascribing
to the world something clean and intellectual in the way of inner
structure” (45). In contrast, the “pluralistic empiricism” that James
preferred, he admitted, “offers but a sorry appearance. It is a turbid,