

Commentary

Playing With Your Food: Review of "Hollows of Experience" by Greg Nixon

William A. Adams*

ABSTRACT

This essay is consistently engaging and thought provoking and for that, a worthwhile read. Important questions about mind and world are raised and considered from multiple angles, but not clearly answered. It is a special narrative skill to assert both sides of an argument without highlighting the contradictions inherent, and without making a strong, contestable statement of one's own claims. Nixon does that trick well, and perhaps that is because his purpose with this essay was merely one of exploration, not to assert a particular point of view. For someone who likes to play with their food before eating it, this might be a pleasing technique. For those who want to bite right in, it will be frustrating, but still tempting.

Key Words: hollows, experience.

This sprawling fifty page essay from educator Greg Nixon (2010) intelligently surveys some difficult questions about the relation between mind and world. Among many questions, he asks whether some experience is non-conscious; what is the role of language in consciousness; can language refer to anything that is beyond the edges of language; where does consciousness come from; how did language arise; can machines think? These, and many related questions are considered with erudition and style. Answers are offered for most of them, supported by citations to the academic literature, although as Nixon himself admits, there can be no final answers to such questions.

Nixon begins with deceptively simple questions: What is the mind? Is it a substance, as Descartes claimed, or is it a dynamic process? And whatever it is, why are we aware of it? What evolutionary advantage is served by introspection? Does it help you stay alive, find food, or reproduce? Billions of animals seem to get along just fine without it. Why are we blessed (or cursed) with self-awareness?

Even more perplexing is the question, what is in our minds anyway? In other words, what is experience? Are we aware of the world as it really is, or is our knowledge limited by the categories we use to sort our experience? Nixon believes that all organisms, even the lowly nematode, are capable of experience, and what they experience is change in the environment. Whenever there is any change in the relationship between an organism and its environment, experience is the result.

How does Nixon know this? He doesn't. No one knows what a nematode experiences, of course. In our own case however, is it true that experience is always a reaction to environmental change? There is empirical evidence that it is, at least for sensory experience. Studies show that sensory adaptation quickly sets in when the environment does not change, or changes too slowly, and a person ceases to be aware of the sensory input. So yes, sensory change is prerequisite for sensory experience. But it seems a bit much to attribute all experience to environmental change. Memories, thoughts, ideas, hopes, plans, regrets, questions, feelings, confusion, and much more, are all mental experiences, none of which necessarily depends on an environmental change. Overgeneralization is

Correspondence: William A. Adams, <http://sites.google.com/site/billadamsphd/>
E-mail: wiladams@brandman.edu

a hazard for anyone who tries to reason from simple first principles to the full landscape of mind and world.

And then there is the hoary question of whether or not the brain creates the mind. Most neuroscientists are sure that it does, and that is the main reason they work so hard to understand the brain. They are not doing it for the sheer joy of the task's complexity. No, they do it because they want to understand how the mind works. Nixon points out what is obvious but what no neuroscientist will admit, that we have merely correlations between brain function and mental function; there is no proven causal connection. In fact we don't know, and can't even imagine how it would be possible, for a brain to create a mind. Another possibility, equally logical, is that the mind creates the brain. In other words, the brain is an intellectual construct we use to account for the varieties of our experience. Wisely, Nixon deigns to choose between these alternatives, since there is no basis on which to choose, but notes that whatever choice is made, it has far-reaching consequences for how one construes mind and world.

Leaving that unending discussion, Nixon returns to one of the original questions, what are we aware of when we are aware of mental contents, and how? His favored hypothesis is that language is the crowbar that levers conceptualized experience from "raw," unconceptualized experience. Language lets us (actually requires us to) objectify our experience into the idea of a mind-independent reality that can be studied by science.

Invoking Immanuel Kant, Nixon reminds us that if there really is a reality "out there" beyond the mind, the mind could never know it. We know only our own interpretations of what we think we perceive and understand. What is really out there, in-itself, regardless of what we know or think about it, is simply not accessible. We know what we know and we don't know what we don't know.

Nixon says that what seems to be out there is really just our reified ideas of what we believe and want, but that does not make the world any less real to us. However, from some imaginary, omniscient, view from nowhere, it would be apparent that what we think we know about the world is not necessarily related to anything that is in the world. Of course, since there is no omniscient God's-eye view, such speculation is fruitless, even if thought-provoking.

Nixon likes to provoke thought, so he indulges his speculative side to imagine what the world-in-itself must be like, even while admitting that we cannot know. One line of thinking leads him to lament that we humans have become alienated from nature (whatever that is). Our intellectual conscious lives force us to conceptualize and categorize all our experience, to such an extent that we are no longer capable of apprehending anything beyond our own linguistic conceptualizations. Thus we are out of touch with nature, unlike all the other animals of the earth, who have a "mystically close" connection with their environments. This romantic nostalgia is not justified, since Nixon admits that non-conscious (unconceptualized) experience is intrinsically unknowable, but this back-to-nature urge is a common theme echoed throughout modern history and worthy of a moment's thought.

A more serious implication of Nixon's point of view is that if all we know and can know is our own conceptualization of the world, then science is a waste of time. At best, science might discover an interesting linguistic network among scientific concepts, but as for discovery of what the world is really like – that is pure fantasy. We simply cannot know what the world is really like. We can only know our own experience, which is itself highly constrained by language, culture, and prior conceptualization. The full implication of this radical, antiscientific viewpoint are not elaborated by Nixon. For example, if science is merely a mind-game and has no special hegemony over the truth of nature, what is to prevent us from being sucked back into the muck of ignorance and superstition from which we have only recently emerged?

I think it is irresponsible, even nihilistic, to argue that the scientific method is merely a formal system, like the rules of chess, that cannot reach beyond the game to grab hold of anything true, unless that is, one is prepared to offer an alternative epistemology that could plausibly lead to broad consensus, as science has. Although Nixon does not explicitly claim that science is merely a specialized form of conversation, he strongly implies that scientific assumptions of naturalism, materialism, and naïve realism are little more than delusion.

Why does Nixon feel that way about science? Apparently, due to his annoyance that the scientific method, by its own rules, is incapable of studying mental phenomena (which are presumably non-physical). But he does admit that "This refusal to comprehend consciousness as the arbiter of all realities there may ever be – including the imagined "reality" of objective materialism – is necessary for the scientific-technological program to continue its materially successful march."

We must overlook the implicit contradiction that any such march of progress could only be illusory if science is only a formal system of symbols, yet oddly, Nixon asserts elsewhere that "There is little doubt about the success of science in explaining the world..." Surely he meant to say the "physical world," since he has argued that experience itself is not amenable to scientific inquiry, but even at that, it is difficult to understand how science, as a mere system of symbols has been so successful, in his view.

In any case, if science is of no help in understanding the mind, we are left on our own to answer the question, what is awareness in itself? Nixon does not believe we are capable of answering that question. Echoing the arguments of philosopher Auguste Comte in the early 1800's, Nixon points out that to use awareness to investigate awareness is like using a flashlight to search for the source of its own illumination.

What are we to do then? As Sherlock Holmes always said, when all reasonable alternatives have been eliminated, you are left with the unreasonable. Groping for a foundation, Nixon thus reaches for the fantastic: "What if awareness or experience is as all-pervasive and foundational as universal background radiation?" But in this speculation, he conveniently separates his ontology from his epistemology, for according to his previous arguments, even if awareness were a background radiation, we could never know it.

In a section on the nature of subjectivity, Nixon tends to the view that subjectivity is self-knowing, or proto-knowing. While he supports the notion that the "self" is merely a narrative structure, somewhat arbitrarily built and maintained by conversations in society, he seems to at the same time believe that "The recognition of the self is, in a sense, the objectification of the subject by the subject..." The relationship between subjectivity and the self is never made explicit. The narrative self is the total set of stories we tell ourselves about who we are, but at the same time, "Subjectivity, then, is the experience of being the implied subject of discourse." Nixon suggests (but does not state) that subjectivity is a prerequisite for development of a narrative self, for subjectivity is necessary to define intersubjectivity, the awareness we have of each other's minds.

Nixon appeals to the psychoanalytic literature to support the concept of intersubjectivity, rather than the experimental psychology literature, which I find far more convincing, but at least we are in agreement that intersubjectivity is a fact of human life: we do read each other's minds. If we did not, language would not be possible. Of course we do not know every little detail of each other's thoughts, but in broad outline, we mutually understand what it is to be a human, in a human body, living on this planet with all its regularities, struggling through the constancies of the developmental arc, and so on. And more than that, we understand, even if only tacitly, the existence of and outlines

of, each other's subjectivity. Nixon frames intersubjectivity in terms of pre-conscious, "mythic" feelings, but I think there is a significant intellectual (if tacit) component to it as well.

Nixon is not one to make stark claims and build conclusions upon clear premises, so it is not always easy to tell where we agree and disagree, for example, on the question of whether or not it is possible for a person to breach the hermeneutic boundaries of conceptualized experience to glimpse some transcendent domain. Nixon seems adamant at first that this is not literally possible, and the attempt to do it mere delusion. "[W]e are "prisoners of our own device" within the realm of the symbolic. As such, nonsymbolic experience — even of a profound or transformative nature — is unable to produce literal knowledge of itself."

Actually, I do agree that transcendent, nonsymbolic experience is, practically, non-experience, and therefore cannot in principle be known to itself. But this does not rule out inferential knowledge, in the same way that we understand the nature of black holes by probing them at the event horizon. In the crepuscules as one approaches and leaves a black hole of non-experience, one understands its context and role within ordinary conscious experience. Nixon does not explicitly take up the possibility of indirect knowledge of non-experience. Yet he does say, enigmatically, of Merleau-Ponty's "hollows of experience" that they are "not [to] be explained or accessed either through some objective knowledge-creation or through an atavistic return to animal nature. It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty and even Derrida to some extent suggest that it is within the "hollows" of experience that we can reconnect *experientially* with primal creativity. Knowledge or interpretation must come after."

So are we in agreement then about the black hole of non-conscious experience? Maybe not. Nixon also says, "It hardly needs saying that such hollows must have everything to do with memory, felt memory — the frame of reference that shapes experience." But is memory not a principal content of conscious experience, precisely what is absent in a "hollow"? Despite the earlier description of a hollow, or as I call it, a black hole of non-experience, Nixon paradoxically says that he chooses, "...and I hope others do, too — a conscious return to the hollows of experience." But that is exactly what is not possible with a hollow. As with most other topics considered in this stimulating essay, Nixon is adept at projecting multiple meanings that do not necessarily cohabit well together.

A final example of that charming ambiguity in Nixon's writing surrounds the topic of creativity. We agree that creativity is a force of nature to be reckoned with, a required first level axiom for any theory of mind. And I think we agree that creativity emanates from those hollows of non-experience previously discussed. But Nixon also wants to say that creativity is some kind of fundamental force of the universe, perhaps another one of his supposed radiation background fields. As a psychologist, I have no need to look to distant galaxies or to quantum collapse phenomena for the source of creativity. It is intrinsic to the mind.

In sum, this essay is consistently engaging and thought provoking and for that, a worthwhile read. Important questions about mind and world are raised and considered from multiple angles, but not clearly answered. It is a special narrative skill to assert both sides of an argument without highlighting the contradictions inherent, and without making a strong, contestable statement of one's own claims. Nixon does that trick well, and perhaps that is because his purpose with this essay was merely one of exploration, not to assert a particular point of view. For someone who likes to play with their food before eating it, this might be a pleasing technique. For those who want to bite right in, it will be frustrating, but still tempting.

References

Nixon, G. M. (2010) Hollow of experience. *Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research*. 1(3): 234-288.