

Commentary

Brief Commentary on Nixon's Three Papers

Roger Cook*

ABSTRACT

A desire for transcendental experience seems to permeate all three papers – the phrase ‘deeply interfused’ struck my eye, and sure enough there it is in Wordsworth’s ‘Lines composed above Tintern Abbey’: “a sense sublime/ Of something far more deeply interfused, /Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns”. So although I would hope that answers to the Hard Problem will come eventually from neuroscience, these essays are greatly to be welcomed as an original and informed perspective on consciousness, expressed in well-turned prose, and occasional poetry.

Key Words: transcendental experience, hard problem, neuroscience.

In the First Paper Nixon (2010a) sets out his stall engagingly, drawing widely on the writings of respected authorities (and furnishing the rest of us laboring in the vineyard with stimulating material for our own theorizing). Following Nixon over the symbolic threshold into language, myth, art and religion (a leap whose implications are further explored in the Second Paper (Nixon, 2010b) and Third Paper (Nixon, 2010c)), we find ourselves in somewhat uncharted waters. We encounter a number of tentative ideas about degrees of awareness, often prefixed ‘pan-’, that are foreign to those having only a nodding acquaintance with philosophy and psychology. But this reader returns to dry land when the classic Nagel question is raised, ‘What is it like to be a bat?’; I feel safe in asserting that a bat is a biosonar organism, supremely sentient, but having no access to consciousness of any kind. But this is not the forum for detailed debate; future issues of JCER will hopefully provide that.

The centrality of language having been established in the First Paper (Nixon, 2010a), the topic is pursued at length in the Second Paper (Nixon, 2010b). The Symbolic Crossing into language is reached, *homo sapiens* having left the real present for the specious ‘present’ of abstract thought. The exposition of numerous aspects of conscious experience is comprehensive, indeed quite mind-expanding to read.

The concepts of myth and the sacred (Nixon, 2010c) show how powerful language can be in human affairs. Both are products of the conscious mind, but like the idea of consciousness going ‘all the way down’ to the nematode worm, hard evidence is scarce. Myths are by definition inaccessible to rational or scientific analysis. However there is much enlightenment to be had from Nixon’s exploration of the topic.

A desire for transcendental experience seems to permeate all three papers – the phrase ‘deeply interfused’ struck my eye, and sure enough there it is in Wordsworth’s ‘Lines composed above Tintern Abbey’: “a sense sublime/ Of something far more deeply interfused, /Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns”. So although I would hope that answers to the Hard Problem will come eventually from neuroscience, these essays are greatly to be welcomed as an original and informed perspective on consciousness, expressed in well-turned prose, and occasional poetry.

Correspondence: Roger Cook E-mail: roger.cook12@btinternet.com

References

- Nixon, G. M. (2010a). From Panexperientialism to Individual Self Consciousness: The Continuum of Experience. *Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research*, 1(3): 216-233.
- Nixon, G. M. (2010b) Hollow of experience. *Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research*. 1(3): 234-288.
- Nixon, G. M. (2010c) Myth and mind: the origin of human consciousness in the discovery of the sacred. *Journal of Consciousness Explanation & Research*. 1(3): 289-337.