

Commentary

Nixon on Conscious and Non-conscious Experience

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ABSTRACT

To my mind (*pace* Heidegger) the enormous focus on consciousness and experience in contemporary philosophy is a continuation of metaphysical mistakes made by the Socratic philosophers and carried forward to this day, requiring “deconstruction” (in its technical postmodern sense). My view is that *Existenz* is “between-two,” between two quantum thermofield theoretical modes in the ground (vacuum) state of quantum brain dynamics. In the belonging-together (matching) of dual thermofield modes, *Existenz* is unfolded as explicate world-thrownness. Discussion of conscious and non-conscious experience, even at Nixon’s perspicuous level, are unfortunately off the mark.

Key Words: conscious, non-conscious, existenz, quantum brain dynamics.

Greg Nixon (2010) has provided a thorough and thoughtful discussion of non-conscious experience, over against conscious experience. Curiously, the much used term “experience” forgets its etymology, which is from *experio*, to try out, as in experiment. And as Nixon points out, the etymology of con-sciousness refers to sociality, to know-together, far different from what we mean by consciousness today. Such dislocations of original meaning attract the deconstructive eye as evidence of textual tension.

To my mind the plethora of articles on consciousness (which even has its own devoted journal, *The Journal of Consciousness Studies*), with no discernable progress but an ever more brilliant controversy to which Nixon contributes, suggests that, frankly speaking, the whole discussion is barking up the wrong tree. Some would even proclaim *Ignoramus et ignoramus*. We are ignorant and shall remain so!

I would rather the whole kit and kaboodle of consciousness and experience be replaced by Heideggerian *Existenz*, a *dynamic* in which we always find ourselves already amidst a world of affordances. (Always finding ourselves thus is the meaning of being “thrown” ... existence is thrown existence.) “Consciousness” and “experience” are then reserved for reflexive existence, quite the opposite of Nixon’s emphasis. “Intentionality” in the existential brain model becomes the brain’s attunement, which is a function of both the brain’s self-tuning activities and priming by sensory input. (For extensive discussions of existence, consciousness and intentional self-tuning see Globus (2009).)

The tangle of thought to which the idea of non-conscious experience leads can be seen by considering only the first 5 of Nixon’s 21 indicators of non-conscious experience, given in his Appendix. He considers blindsight to be the premier scientific example of non-conscious experience. Blindsight patients, while consciously blind in some part of the visual field, may respond appropriately to stimuli in that part of the visual field. But this does not necessarily imply any nonconscious experience, only that the stimuli have primed the brain’s attunement which constrains to appropriate responses, irrespective of any conscious or non-conscious contentual experience. The conception of non-conscious experience is replaced by the brain’s attunement.

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Anton's syndrome is, I believe, commonly misunderstood in the way that Nixon does. It is widely thought the patient is blind—has no visual experience—and confabulates having visual experience. However, that the patient actually *has* visual experience (though usually dim) is shown by a patient *discovering* after a year, to her great dismay, that she is actually blind (Raney and Nielsen, 1942). Clearly she had visual experience the whole time, probably via some kind of coherent resonance into the visual system from other intact perceptual systems. The confabulations serve to explain the mistakes the patient makes while dimly having a visual experience autonomous of visual input (much as a hypnotic subject confabulates the reasons for actions actually controlled by post-hypnotic suggestion). Anton's syndrome features a dim conscious visual experience, just as the patients claim, and has nothing to do with a non-conscious experience.

Prosopagnosia is the inability to recognize consciously faces even though there are bodily evidences that the face has in fact been recognized. Nixon comments that “obviously recognition is being non-consciously experienced,” but there is no requirement that any kind of experience is involved. The same mechanism as in blindsight comes into play: sensory input primes the intentional attunement which signals the body in preparation for a conscious experience that never comes. To be ready to recognize someone does not imply that recognition will be experienced, if there is some fault in the mechanism. Priming of intentional attunement also explains Nixon's cases of physiological and emotional responses to people who are not recognized and actions that are not owned.

Nixon considers split-brain experiments as providing evidence for non-conscious experience. He states, “Again, physiological and emotional response readings indicate that subjects are experiencing, but are not conscious of it.” But split-brain studies only show that the right brain cannot talk about its conscious experiences. Gazzaniga and Miller (2009) indeed state that “while the right hemisphere's visual representations are much sharper and its perceptions of space are much keener than the left hemisphere's, the right hemisphere is probably mute, autistic-like, and mentally impaired” (268). A non-reportable experience is not the same as a non-conscious experience (unless consciousness is equated with reportability, which Nixon does not appear to intend).

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