

Commentary

Consciousness as Shared and Categorized Result of Experience

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ABSTRACT

I very much second the basic tenets of Nixon as to separating the concepts of experience and consciousness. However, I see the relation of these terms in a somewhat different way: experience is the general basis of our existence, a process in the organism-environment system, whereas consciousness is based on shared results of the experience, and categorized by language. Everything that is not realized in shared results of experience stays nonconscious, and does not exist for the subject, although its effects may be seen in his actions, as Greg Nixon quite correctly remarks.

Key Words: consciousness, experience, categorized result.

I think Greg Nixon (Nixon, 2010) is quite on the right track when trying to clarify the relation between unconscious and conscious experience. It is true that these concepts are usually used (if used at all) in a very opaque way, especially in constructivism and cognitive brain research. In the former, it is often unclear (at least to me) if reality is seen only as a result of construction of conscious experience, nonconscious processing playing no role. In the latter, the processing in the brain is endowed with some magical powers that make some of the brain processes conscious, whereas the rest of these processes stay at the nonconscious level.

I completely agree with Nixon that the terms “experience” and “consciousness” are not interchangeable, but my reasons may be a little different than those proposed by Nixon. According to the organism-environment system theory (Jarvilehto, 2000; Jarvilehto 2009), consciousness appeared as a new kind of organization of organism-environment systems, as an aspect of the social organization based on cooperation of individual systems for shared or common results. Thus, contrary to traditional or common sense explanations, consciousness is not considered as something private, but it is rather characteristic of the structure of the cooperative system directed towards common results. It seems this conclusion is quite aligned with Nixon’s ideas.

In the framework of the organism-environment theory the criterion for consciousness is the possibility of report, that of communicating and indicating common results. However, with words we can never describe an action, but only common results. If I want to tell what happens when I take a pencil from the table, I must divide my action into subresults: my hand is now here, I move it, at the next moment it is there, I grip the pencil, etc. If I am further asked what I mean by “move” or “grip”, I must again go to the subresults and say, for example, that moving means the hand is now here, but at the next moment there. We have no words for the action itself, and, in principle, we cannot have this, if consciousness is related only to the results of action. In fact, each verb is an abbreviation of a sequence of results.

From this it follows that we can be conscious only of common results, of something that we share with other people. Consciousness, thus, is basically non-continuous, and based on a continuous life process, most of which stays non-conscious for us. However, language offers the possibility of a theory of action for explanation and understanding of one’s own behavior. Language makes possible

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the existence of the past and the future in the present, because with the help of language we may reflect on what happened and what will be happening. This is the basis for our impression that consciousness is continuous and that we can use language for the description of the actual processes.

Although words are for cooperation and for the achievement of common results, the common results are something that may never be exhaustively described by words. Speech and language are only tools for creating the organization leading to the common results. A word is an "interpretation" in the sense that it refers to an indicator of results. For example, the word "ship" denotes a piece of reality (thing) which is an indicator of the result (e.g. the possibility to go overseas). The word is a human interpretation of a piece of reality. For an ant that part of the world would not be a ship, but something else (of which we will never have exact knowledge, because we cannot share it with the ant). The identification of the indicator of result with the result itself means the stopping of development, limiting oneself to what is visible.

The organism-environment theory states that the parts of environment belonging to the organism-environment system are parts defined by the structure of the system: "Physical description of a living system can never be a complete description, not only because physics has nothing to say about life as such, but also because the parts of the system are not selected according to the physical laws, but on the basis of the living structure" (Jarvilehto, 2000). Thus, when we describe the environment of an animal, we do not really describe the parts belonging to the living system. We describe these parts as separated from the system and joined to the system of the observer. Therefore, we cannot observe the "Umwelt" of the animal (cf. v. Uexküll and Kriszat, 1932); we may describe only our own Umwelt and relate this to the body of the animal. When observing the behavior of the animal, we may then see how the animal relates to such parts of the environment, which, in fact, belong to our own system.

This consideration may be developed even further. When we give a description of our own environment, we do not really describe those environmental parts belonging to the organism-environment system. Instead, we give the description of certain parts of the world from the point of view of the human species as a whole, because the consciously described human environment is a shared environment. All conscious things are common; therefore the whole human world, as it may be described, is a social world. All conscious experiences are common experiences.

When I say something about my environment, then it is no longer my private environment, i.e. that which belongs to my specific organism-environment system. It is a shared "third person" view of my experience. The environment cannot be extracted from the organism-environment system and be described as if "from inside." The human being cannot describe anything that is completely private, because the contents of his consciousness are common, shared with other people. This means also that we never have conscious knowledge of our environment so far it is regarded as belonging to the organism-environment system; we know it consciously only through the results of our actions. I think this would pretty much correspond to "Erfahrung", as discussed by Nixon.

We do not consciously know how we are connected to the world, because we act in the world as organism-environment systems. As conscious beings we may at any moment separate some parts of the world as objects of our activity, and these parts are as results of the perceptual experience shared with other people. When we describe these parts, we use words as indicators of these results. Thus, the verbal description of a part of the world is only an indicator of the shared part, but not identical with it. Such a verbal description is good enough when we create co-operative organization for common results; it gives to the other human being the possibility to direct his activity to the part of the world in question, and to join it into his organism-environment system. The real part of the world involved in the cooperation is, however, always more than the verbal description reveals.

This fact manifests itself clearly in teaching of the skills. You may describe by words how to ride a bicycle, but this does not much help the person who wants to learn to ride. If you want to teach him you have to coach him by showing the motions and the ways to balance the bicycle. Finally, when the student learns to ride, no one really knows how it happened.

From the point of view of the organism-environment system theory, this is understandable. As our consciousness is related only to the result, we can consciously deal with, and verbally report, only sequences of results, not the processes as such. Thus, we can learn how to throw a ball, if we first consciously listen to the instructions of the teacher (put the hand like this, press the ball, move the hand, release the ball), and follow the described sequence of results. Then, in the process of repeating the intermediate results, our functional organization is changed such that we do no longer pay attention to the single phases of the action. When mastering the task, our behavior is directed from the beginning directly towards the intended goal. We now can throw the ball, but we don't know how it happens, because the process itself is nonconscious.

Summarizing, I very much second the basic tenets of Nixon as to separating the concepts of experience and consciousness. However, I see the relation of these terms in a somewhat different way: experience is the general basis of our existence, a process in the organism-environment system, whereas consciousness is based on shared results of the experience, and categorized by language. Everything that is not realized in shared results of experience stays nonconscious, and does not exist for the subject, although its effects may be seen in his actions, as Greg Nixon quite correctly remarks.

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