

Commentary

Brief Commentary on Nixon's "From Panexperientialism to Conscious Experience"

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ABSTRACT

This is a brief commentary on Nixon's "From Panexperientialism to Conscious Experience".

Key Words: conscious experience, unconscious experience.

Nixon (2010) says that his aim in "From Panexperientialism to Conscious Experience: The Continuum of Experience," is "to demonstrate that the terms experience and consciousness are not interchangeable" (p217). He explores meanings different thinkers attribute to "experience," "consciousness," and to the ways forms of these words can be combined. He concludes (p227) by suggesting that "the distinction between conscious experience (aka consciousness) and experience as such is well worth making." I agree. Even before reading his essay, I believed that the distinction is valid.

But I disagree that "the idea remains the same" [the idea of experience as such] if we were to "call it unconscious experience, consciousness without mind, core consciousness, or experience without a subject." For me, the same kind of distinction holds between "unconscious experience" and "experience" as holds between "conscious experience" and "experience." In both cases, unmodified "experience" is the broader category, and it is made narrower by the addition of either modifier.

I have different reasons for disagreeing with the phrases "consciousness without mind" and "experience without a subject." I see them both as self-contradictory, and thus can't use them to refer to the same idea as "experience as such," which I do not see as being self-contradictory. I don't know what Nixon means by "core consciousness," and thus have a hard time understanding how he can mean by it the same thing that he means by "experience as such."

He asks, "What is it like to be a bat, to have non-conscious experience?" When I imagine what it might be like to be a bat, I don't imagine my bat-like experience to be totally unconscious, even though I don't imagine my "bat-self" to have the same kind of experience I do. I believe that a bat is conscious when it is flying around catching bugs, and unconscious much of the time it is hanging upside-down in its cave. But, of course, as Nixon points out in earlier in the essay, the bat will neither agree or disagree with me.

"Radical constructivism," Nixon writes, "has suffered criticism because naïve skeptics ask, 'You mean the world out there is like that because we make it so?'" (p228). I am a skeptic, though I don't like to admit that I am naïve. I suspect that my critical realist stance in philosophy accounts for many of the disagreements with the positions taken by some of the authorities Nixon cites, and with some of the propositions Nixon himself asserts.

For example, he (p221-222) attributes to Martin Jay the claim that "Schopenhauer, Heidegger, Benjamin, Adorno, Bataille, Foucault, Barthes, and possibly Oakeshott, Dewey, and the trickster of text, Derrida" approve of the notion of "experience without a subject." Of course, they might have "approved" of this notion somewhat in the same way that I approve of the notion of unicorns. I

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don't believe they really exist, but "approve" of their use in stories. But if their approval means that these eminent men once believed that an experience can actually occur without there being an experiencing subject, then I passionately disagree with them. Nixon, however, seems to be much more willing than I am to praise these famous men for their approval of this notion.

References

Nixon, G. M. (2010). From Panexperientialism to Individual Self Consciousness: The Continuum of Experience. *Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research*, 1(3): 216-233.