

Commentary

Hollows of a Science of Consciousness?

Alfredo Pereira Jr.*

ABSTRACT

I consider Nixon's essay a well thought discussion of the possibility of a genuine science of consciousness. Most of the sections are worth discussing, but to find the main message it may be necessary to read between the lines. The good news is that he does not present true impossibilities for this science, but his discussion leads to the (sound) conclusion that it would have to account for many unconscious factors that make us creative and human.

Key Words: consciousness, science, hollows.

In the well crafted article "Hollows of Experience", Nixon (2010) begins by stating: "The fundamental division in approaches to the question of consciousness is whether the brain creates experience or experience the brain." (p.8). These alternatives are illustrated by the classical Materialist and Idealist approaches in Philosophy and Psychology. However, there is no 'a priori' reason to rule out the possibility of conscious activity being determined by the brain and, in turn, influencing brain activity. One of the main attempts to formulate and defend such a "co-evolutive" view is T. Deacon's book "The Symbolic Species", acknowledged by Nixon.

He prefers to emphasize the dichotomy, possibly because the Idealist alternative would make it difficult – if not impossible – to build a Science of Consciousness, in the context of current scientific standards of "objectivity". Some kinds of Idealism are incompatible with science, but not exactly because they hold that consciousness controls the brain. This possibility is perfectly admissible for non-Idealists, maybe not for radical Materialists. The problem (of our scientific standards) with Idealism arises when supernatural forces are assumed to express themselves by means of the individual's body and even control his/her brain.

In the second section, he departs from the assumption that "When experience becomes conscious, it has itself become an object. No longer one with the environment, we now feel ourselves as distinct from it, opposed to it. In the same way, we become aware of ourselves in the world and self itself is objectified" (p.9).

I disagree with this proposed semantics of "experience" and similarity of conscious experience with such an (introspective) objectification. Alternatively, I take "conscious episodes" to refer to content experienced by a subject in present time, and "experience" as the interaction of the individual's body, brain and environment (Pereira Jr. and Ricke, 2009). In this view, what conscious activity does is to individualize episodes in time, making them available to subjective experiences, which are then conceived as embodied (in the individual's material structure) and embedded (in the environment). Our differences regarding these basic concepts are subtle, but make a difference for the discussion of what would be a science of consciousness. Instead of thinking of consciousness as "the arbiter of all realities", I view it as a sequence of snapshots in a sea of unconscious experiences. In this regard, I wonder which of the two concepts of consciousness above are better fit by Merleau-Ponty's quoted phrase, "the *sensible* hollowing itself out".

Correspondence: Alfredo Pereira Jr., Adjunct Professor, São Paulo State University, Botucatu, SP, Brasil
E-mail: api@ibb.unesp.br

Jumping to the last section - appropriately called "The Hollows of Experience" - I find Nixon attributing the origin of human and non-human creativity to unconscious experiences, not to the conscious tip of the iceberg. This seems to be in contradiction with his initial conception of consciousness. Then he proposes a change: "This is not to abnegate "I" consciousness but to suggest instead another way of being conscious, one that allows for both vital experience and for awareness of that experience." (p.40). OK, Greg, but let me ask: did you find this conclusion only after writing most sections of the paper? If you knew it from the start, why begin with the "I-consciousness" view?

At the end of the paper, Nixon tries to picture - with Heidegger - biology and technology as enemies to an authentic understanding of consciousness: "we may choose to define consciousness as a biological byproduct isolated from primordial experience and so continue to forge a future guided by the triumph of technology...As much as the symbolic mode of being conscious allows us to guide our own autopoiesis, I choose instead — and I hope others do, too — a conscious return to the hollows of experience." Here I just recall that some authors — maybe Merleau-Ponty and Maturana/Varela themselves — have a different view of biological processes and others have a less pessimistic view of the effects of technology (e.g., in the emerging field of "artificial consciousness").

In conclusion, I consider Nixon's essay a well thought discussion of the possibility of a genuine science of consciousness. Most of the sections are worth discussing, but to find the main message it may be necessary to read between the lines. The good news is that he does not present true impossibilities for this science, but his discussion leads to the (sound) conclusion that it would have to account for many unconscious factors that make us creative and human.

References

- Nixon, G. M. (2010) Hollow of experience. *Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research*. 1(3): 234-288.
Pereira Jr., A. and Ricke, H., 2009. What is Consciousness? Towards a Preliminary Definition. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 16(5), 28-45.