

Commentary

Comment on Gregory Nixon's "From Panexperientialism to Individual Self Consciousness"

Steven M. Rosen*

ABSTRACT

Semantic and substantive issues raised by Nixon's essay are explored. Despite questions regarding the semantics, it is concluded that Nixon effectively challenges the Cartesian paradigm of consciousness by demonstrating that experience is not limited to the reflective self-consciousness of human beings but pervades nature at every level.

Key Words: consciousness, panexperientialism, self-consciousness, Cartesian.

Nixon (2010) offers a thought-provoking essay written in an engaging style that held my interest from beginning to end. Broadly speaking, the paper's central theme is that we no longer need to limit our understanding of experience to the reflective self-consciousness of human beings, with the rest of nature comprising naught but insensate "dead matter." Following Whitehead, Nixon holds that nature is experiential from top to bottom. This panexperientialist approach is agreeable to me and I applaud Nixon's imaginative advocacy of it.

In the abstract to the paper, Nixon asserts his aim of demonstrating that "the terms *experience* and *consciousness* are not interchangeable." He then proceeds to offer various perspectives on consciousness and experience evidently intended to bring out the nuances, subtleties, and ambiguities of these terms. The author acknowledges the challenge posed by the wide variability of definitions from one source to another, and, as I read the material, I was struck by the seeming arbitrariness of some of the distinctions, particularly those more concerned with semantics than with substance.

Summarizing the two main schools of thought on his subject, Nixon suggests that the current controversy essentially boils down to those thinkers who contend that all experience is conscious but distinguish reflective or self-consciousness from other forms of consciousness, and those who identify conscious experience with reflectiveness, all other experience being taken as non-conscious. The author appears to favor the latter view, as is consistent with his goal of demonstrating that the terms "consciousness" and "experience" are not interchangeable. In my own view however, the controversy is something of a tempest in a teapot. To me it seems the underlying issue is indeed largely a semantic one revolving around the question of how broadly one defines the term "consciousness." I believe the matter can be readily resolved by consistently implementing an idea that Nixon himself prominently emphasizes elsewhere in the same paper.

The subtitle of Nixon's essay is "The Continuum of Experience." Although, in a number of passages, he implicitly draws a categorical distinction between conscious and non-conscious experience, at a certain point in his presentation he adds a caveat:

It should be noted that no one is implying the line between the light of conscious apprehension and experiencing 'in the dark' is sharp or apparent or that there are not

Correspondence: Steven M. Rosen, Ph.D., Emeritus Professor of Psychology, City University of New York
E-mail: StevenRosen@shaw.ca

important degrees of difference within what I am calling non-conscious experience and conscious experience. Experience is a continuum, as Alfred North Whitehead explained.

And yet, even after acknowledging this, Nixon continues to draw stark contrasts between conscious and non-conscious experience, never actually articulating explicitly the possibility of *degrees* of consciousness. It seems to me the problem may lie in the author's persistent tendency to read the word "consciousness" narrowly, tacitly interpreting it as *reflective* consciousness. Near the end of the essay, Nixon speaks of "sensations derived from relational encounters between two fundamental entities, which later became internalized within each entity as its own via physiological memory traces...as Deiss (2009) has suggested (though he still equates experience with consciousness)." Nixon's parenthetical disclaimer notwithstanding, I see no reason why the internalized sensations he refers to could not be considered rudimentary forms of consciousness, rather than as purely non-conscious experience. In fact, it stands to reason that – if development moves along a continuum from non-conscious to conscious awareness as Nixon states elsewhere – the internalized sensations in question should constitute a step away from what is completely unconscious toward consciousness. My working hypothesis then is that Nixon's inclination to sharply distinguish consciousness from experience and prove that the two terms are not interchangeable is rooted in a semantic predilection to equate all consciousness with fully reflective human consciousness, thereby disallowing the possibility of *degrees* of consciousness. In his penultimate paragraph, Nixon himself seems to relax his denial of non-reflective consciousness by speaking of the "void consciousness" of the mystics. And he closes by acknowledging the somewhat arbitrary semantic nature of the issue he has dealt with, stating that while "the distinction between conscious experience (aka consciousness) and *experience as such* is well worth making...if the terminology offends, call it unconscious experience, consciousness without mind, [or] core consciousness....The idea remains the same."

Having expressed my misgivings on the matter of semantics, I want to reaffirm my support for the substance of Nixon's presentation. His characterization of "void consciousness" struck a particularly responsive chord in me. He describes it poetically as "a sort of background radiation of the psyche that is without objects of awareness, intentionality, or self-direction (indeed *without self*)." Void consciousness is a pure potentiality for experience, "an invisible pan-present non-presence ... that would have zero dimensions (0-D) and remain at time-zero in the eternal present." In my work on topological phenomenology (2006), I too set forth a zero-dimensional realm of timeless potentiality, a paradoxical domain that defies description in positive terms, as Nixon says of void consciousness. In fact, the essentially panexperientialist account offered in my *Topologies of the Flesh* details several basic dimensions of consciousness or experience, each a lifeworld in its own right with its own topological structure and distinctive degree of reflectiveness. Another point of contact between Nixon's work and my own concerns his references to modern physics as a field of study with significant relevance for panexperientialism. In *The Self-Evolving Cosmos* (2008), I propose what is, in effect, a panexperientialist account of physics and cosmology wherein the basic fields and forces of nature are not merely seen in physical terms but understood as dynamically co-evolving psychophysical action spheres.

By way of closing, let me underscore my appreciation of Nixon's efforts. It is indeed worthwhile to challenge the still-influential Cartesian paradigm that limits consciousness and lived experience to the reflective abstractions of human beings and regards the rest of nature as but a lifeless automaton. In Nixon's panexperientialism, nature returns to life and its soul is reanimated.

References

- Nixon, G. M. (2010) From panexperientialism to individual self consciousness: The continuum of experience. *Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research*. 1(3): 216-233
- Rosen, Steven M. (2006) *Topologies of the Flesh*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.
- . (2008) *The Self-Evolving Cosmos*. Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific Publishing.