

Commentary

Comments on Nixon's Three Essays

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ABSTRACT

Nixon does indicate that all may not be well in our much vaunted leap into analytical self-consciousness, but this seems to be missed by most commentators. The dimming shadow of self hangs over all our technological successes. Have we become largely physically and even spiritually impotent by the self construction that controls our emotions and our world? Are we so controlled that our lives "end not with a bang but a whimper"? Eliot seems to think so, and it appears Nixon is in full agreement. In fact, there are plenty of indications that he, Nixon, feels a nostalgia for untamed, uninhibited life in Nature. His explanation how we became "symbol-mongers" is most impressive and the literary manner in which he pulls it off really demonstrates his point more than his artificial use of scholarship or reason.

Key Words: analytical, self-consciousness, Eliot, symbol.

Thank you for JCER 1(3) focused on three essays by Gregory M. Nixon (2010a, 2010b, 2010c). These three work in concert to provide a complete perspective on consciousness studies and what a refreshing perspective it is! The essays explore the likelihood that when we refer to "consciousness", the only actual referent for the word we have available is our own conscious experience, which, as philosophic phenomenology has revealed, is always self-consciousness. Between our minds "in here" and the world "out there" interposes the mirror of self, or perhaps the order should be reversed so that the world "out there" is the source for the illusory mind in here. As a result of this, according to Nixon, we err when we attribute this same consciousness to other animals, though clearly such animals (and even plants and perhaps even all dynamic systems) are aware or, as he seems to prefer, experiencing, so Nixon develops the concept of unconscious experience.

In essay one (Nixon, 2010a), he labors on this distinction with general success, I think, but unfortunately he may be interpreted by some as being "anthropocentric" by claiming that our human self-consciousness or conscious experience is in some way superior to other forms of experience. I see no evidence of this, and in his second essay (Nixon, 2010b), the beautifully named "Hollows of Experience", he makes clear that we may have lost something vital in becoming conscious of our own animal experiencing. That our attainment of conscious experience is equal to the attainment of abstract symbolic communication via the structures of formal language is made overwhelmingly clear in this grand essay, and I, for one, certainly applaud his use of poetry and other literary devices to make his point, since his point is that our minds have crossed a literary threshold, the symbolic threshold, into a new world of human culture that is made almost entirely of the abstract symbols we believe in so fervently. He quotes T. S. Eliot here and there, but I do not recall seeing any quotations from Eliot's "The Hollow Men", which seems to me would augment his "hollows of experience" and "hollows of memory" perfectly. Yes, we have created a new world of symbolic experience that goes far beyond the natural environment of our embodiment and in which we have far more choices, but have we also isolated ourselves from the vital sources of life? Eliot begins his poem with this suggestion:

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men

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Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar

According to Eliot, we have lost the ability to act in a decisive fashion, perhaps even to make the spiritual leaps that would lead to transcendent experiences. We are immersed in, lost in self, the frame of our conscious experience. "No matter where we go, there we are" takes on a whole new meaning here. Could it be that inescapable self-presence is the shadow to which Eliot refers in his final lines?

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow

Life is very long

Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

So, in brief, Nixon does indicate that all may not be well in our much vaunted leap into analytical self-consciousness, especially in Part II of this essay, but this seems to be missed by most commentators. The dimming shadow of self hangs over all our technological successes. Have we become largely physically and even spiritually impotent by the self construction that controls our emotions and our world? Are we so controlled that our lives "end not with a bang but a whimper"? Eliot seems to think so, and it appears Nixon is in full agreement. In fact, there are plenty of indications that he, Nixon, feels a nostalgia for untamed, uninhibited life in Nature (and he does capitalize "nature" more than once). His explanation how we became "symbol-mongers" is most impressive and the literary manner in which he pulls it off really demonstrates his point more than his artificial use of scholarship or reason.

That he is an artist more than a scholar is finally made clear in his last essay, "Myth and Mind". Nixon is no doubt erudite and as well-read as any other scholar I've read, but he does not fear to make leaps of the imagination or draw connections just because they fit into the story he is telling. I applaud him for this since his message, again, is more literary than scientific. That Nixon is aware of this is made clear in his Introduction, where he admits that, finally, his works are "mythmaking". But aren't all our works just so? Even our so-called facts must be interpreted into some sort of story structure. In the last essay, he insists we are creatures of our own mythology; we are autopoietic self-creations and this process continues. Nixon even implies that all our knowledge is in essence a form of mythology. We cannot escape our own creation. I believe that this revelation is the most hopeful thing about these essays, for it implies that we may yet find the global myths that will liberate us from our isolation in cultures and selves.

Finally, these essays (Nixon, 2010a, 2010b & 2010c) are important more as prophecies than as explanations. Whether Nixon's detailed explanations are true in any way that can be proven I have no idea. But his fine literary skills and metaphoric craftsmanship lead the reader to believe that s/he can become more than s/he is, if only we can find the right way to conceive of ourselves, and then find the right way to put those selves aside as we stand ready to become something entirely other.

References

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