

Response to Commentary

Response to the Commentary of Alfredo Pereira, Jr. (The Sensible Hollowing Itself Out)

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I appreciate the careful analysis Alfredo Pereira, Jr. brings to “Hollows of Experience,” my major piece in this issue, and I am pleased to see he has revised his criticism to note that I do not classify my approach within the philosophical dichotomy of realism vs idealism. Instead, I embrace Terrence Deacon’s co-evolution of language and the brain, each affecting change in the other, which is to say conscious experience may depend on the brain and the brain is in turn changed by conscious experience (since language and symbol provided the context for human (self) consciousness). However this begs the question of experience in itself, since most of our experiencing, I believe, is unconscious. Pereira does not immediately make this distinction. From the Whiteheadian perspective of panexperientialism, the brain is but a complex organized system of organic matter, and matter-energy itself consists of moments of dynamic experiencing when change takes place. This means the brain, like all matter, *experiences* before it becomes the particular organ for the focus of our conscious experience. This rather throws out the archaic (theological) distinction between idealism and realism.

I am intrigued by his suggestion that “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),” but this seems unnecessarily contorted compared to my simple distinction between *raw* experience and experience that has become conscious of itself because of the symbolic capacity. (And by *raw experience* I mean both that which the body feels and the experienced environment, which is *not* distinct from bodily experience.)

I like Pereira’s view of conscious experience as a sequence of snapshots in a sea of unconscious experiences, but do not think it is all that far from James’s *stream of consciousness* image. Merleau-Ponty’s “the sensible hollowing itself out” seems to me to refer to the *traces* or flashes of the memory of experiences that cannot literally be recalled because such experiences were non-conscious, (unconscious or preconscious). I did not emphasize enough that such experiences are probably all somatic – *of* the body and its interactions in a particular ecosystem.

Pereira appears to misunderstand me when he states that in Part II I abandon the position I take in Part I. He states that in Part II I identify primal/universal creativity with unconscious experience, which would take creativity and free-will away from the conscious sphere. It appears I was clear in stating my view that conscious experience

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emerges from non-conscious experience but not nearly so clear in expressing my idea that non-conscious experience is itself a relational emergent from the dynamic sea of potential existence we reduce to the word *creativity*. Temporarily appearing quantum fields may emerge from this “sea” and sometimes interact. Existence, that is, *being*, begins with dynamic interaction within such a field or between fields/systems of matter-energy. Such dynamic interaction is relational (for example at the subatomic level), but (and I must emphasize this “but”), it is relational and thus experiencing *before* actual entities – things, particles, objects – emerge. This is Whitehead’s process cosmology and it appears to me that quantum physics today has in many ways borne out the great man’s speculations (cf. the quantum vacuum or flux as the creative sea). Whitehead too saw universal creativity as a primary of the universe, though he felt it must be guided by the three faces of that which he called God, a hypothesis for which, if I may say so, I have no need.

In my conclusion, I stretch my neck way out and suggest it may be possible to return to the spontaneity of animal experience and the even more acute spontaneity of the creative impetus without abandoning the quality of consciousness we have learned by becoming the symbolic species. (How exactly we could do this, I don’t know. Perhaps a Dionysian artist can tell us!) Yes, as Pereira notes, I do express some fear of computerized artificial consciousness and he sees that as a fear of technology; however, as in the essay, I see such artificial consciousness as just that, *artificial*, precisely because it would not be conscious *experience*, just conscious computation, a kind of multiple perspective processing completely free from the creative life impulse as found in, say, evolutionary processes. This seems to me to be dangerous because it is, well, disconnected from life experience and the living well of the creative source.

References

Pereira Jr., A. (2010) Hollows of a Science of Consciousness? *Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research*. 1(3): 379-380.