

## Commentary

# Commentary on Nixon's From Panexperientialism to Individual Self Consciousness

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### ABSTRACT

Nixon brings to our attention that consciousness changes and is of many kinds. Consciousness studies focus on only one kind of consciousness, ego consciousness also termed self-consciousness. Nixon's essay may cause some to re-think that issue. A brief summary of the concepts of God, divine Consciousness and human consciousness described in Indian philosophy is added here to dispel any misconceptions of this philosophy.

**Key Words:** Panexperientialism, self consciousness.

Is not consciousness the ability to experience? If there is unconscious experience, in other words, if consciousness is not required to experience, is that experience similar to the contents of a computer memory? (The author seems to think understanding the continuum of experience — from nonconscious to conscious, to self-transcending awareness is a first step to panexperientialism). If experience happens without consciousness does it happen vice versa, in other words can consciousness exist without any accompanying experience? Trying to answer these questions via self examination and self interrogation is tricky because the answers one gets from such self introspection are subjective and no two individuals get the same answer. The subjective nature of these investigations is probably the reason why philosophical papers on consciousness by different authors often contain the same words (such as consciousness, awareness, experience, and so on) but with different meanings and often not clearly defined but freely used as does this paper. The author seems to think consciousness, awareness, and experience are all different but it is not clear how consciousness and awareness differ according to him and it is not clear what self-transcending awareness is.

I tried to understand unconscious experience using the computer-brain analogy. Nowadays, computers can perform many tasks which in earlier days, were supposed to require a high level of intelligence and education. Today's Artificial Intelligence (AI) programs can simulate several thought processes such as learning and problem solving. This is all possible because the human brain is in some ways, similar to a computer. Computer users frequently use expressions like "the computer knows", "it does not understand", "it thinks", and so on. In fact, when we say "the computer knows the object", we mean the following: A computer (behaves as if it) knows an object (a data item or a program instruction), when a representation of that object as bytes of "0"s and "1"s in a digital computer or qubits in a quantum computer, in other words, as a sequence of states of hardware units, exists in its memory. Once such a representation is entered into a computer's memory, it can perform any number of operations with that representation. The computer can compare the object with other objects also known to it similarly. It can add, subtract, compute functions of it, draw a picture of it, and so on. The computer can do almost anything that a person can do with that object and behave as though it "knows" the object without really knowing anything! On the other hand, a computer programmer knows the meaning of an algorithm in his/her head; the algorithm in the programmer's head is not the same as its code stored in a computer (digital or quantum). The

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programmer assigns meaning to the code; the computer does not. A living human brain is similar to a computer in the sense that it has a hardware-like physical component as well as a lot of information; but unlike the computer, the brain carries some "real information" (meaning, conscious or unconscious experience, desires, emotions, etc.). So it seems reasonable to expect that a human brain "knows" an object (physical or abstract), if and only if a physical representation of that object as well as some "real information" specific to the object both exist already in its memory. Hence it is possible that the human brain may sometimes contain some "real information" which has no associated physical representation (in terms of neural pathways etc.) and hence is not conscious of that piece of "real information". Such information could be unconscious experience.

As to what the author calls "void consciousness of the mystics", Consciousness in Indian philosophy, is referred to by the inanimate pronoun "it" to emphasize that it is nonphysical and so it has no gender. In ancient Indian philosophy (all written in Sanskrit) God is Consciousness which is different from human consciousness that we are currently trying to understand. Three essential qualities of God are mentioned in this literature:

1. Sat – means always and everywhere present
2. Chit – means conscious and alert
3. Ananda – means perfect bliss

When they emphasize the second quality, God is Consciousness that is always present (hence never slumbering) unlike human consciousness which comes and goes. God is both personal and impersonal. God is impersonal because God is not flesh but spirit and therefore has no gender. God is personal in the sense that God is always conscious, blissful, loving and merciful and has free will. An elaborate explanation of the above three qualities implies that God or Consciousness is independent of space, time and causality. Free will means not to be conditioned or controlled by any cause, past, present, or future. That is why God was not born at some point of time from somebody but He/She/It exists always and everywhere and has no origin but is the origin of everything. Consciousness is said to be undescrivable because to describe anything, we need a language which is a set of symbols and rules and therefore insufficient to describe something which is not bound by any rule. On the other hand, human consciousness is subject to causality. The state of a lifeless object usually depends on the past. The state of a human beings (and many other living beings) depends both on past and future because we have goals, purposes, desires, and so on (all these look into the future).

## References

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