

Guest Editorial

Beyond the Circle of Life

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Abstract

It seems certain to me that *I* will die and stay dead. By “I”, I mean me, Greg Nixon, this person, this self-identity. I am so intertwined with the chiasmus of lives, bodies, ecosystems, symbolic intersubjectivity, and life on this particular planet that I cannot imagine this identity continuing alone without them. However, one may survive one’s life by believing in universal awareness, perfection, and the peace that passes all understanding. Perhaps, we bring this back with us to the Source from which we began, changing it, enriching it. Once we have lived – if we don’t choose the eternal silence of oblivion by life denial, vanity, indifference, or simple weariness – the Source learns and we awaken within it. Awareness, consciousness, is universal – it comes with the territory – so maybe you will be one of the few prepared to become unexpectedly enlightened after the loss of body and self. You may discover your own apotheosis – something you always were, but after a lifetime of primate experience, now *much more*. Since you are of the Source and since you have changed from life experience and yet retained the dream of ultimate awakening, plus you have brought those chaotic emotions and memories back to the Source with you (though no longer *yours*), your life & memories will have mattered. Those who awaken beyond the death of self will have changed Reality.

Keywords: Consciousness, Source, life, death, circle of life, awakening, experience, memory.

To be immortal is commonplace; except for man, all creatures are immortal, for they are ignorant of death; what is divine, terrible, incomprehensible, is to know that one is immortal. (Jorge Luis Borges, *The Immortal*, 1943.)

The *circle of life*, made famous in Disney’s “The Lion King”, is the circle of time: from life comes death and death helps bring forth new life. The simple point is that that all of Nature (except for a rare group of scientists who actually think the universe will expand in one-way entropic time until all the lights go out) unquestioningly accepts: death is as much a part of life as the dark side of the moon is a part of the moon. In fact, you cannot have one without the other. Life on Earth would have suffocated and run out of food sources with the endless identical replication of amoebae in the same way mitosis would never have allowed evolution to begin. It took meiosis and death, not to mention sexual reproduction, for the evolutionary process to set forth. Life lives off life, and death and sex are necessary for that to happen. To begin the process of unimaginable differentiation that came to flourish across this planet (and possibly others)

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required the old or weak make room for the new and that sexual breeding from different gene pools allow for slow evolutionary mixing and unexpected mutations. In short, the first point I wish to make is that *death is good*, or at least a necessary part of life. It's especially good if we accept the recent philosophizing of Thomas Nagel (2012) that evolution has a *natural teleology* (undirected by deity), a purpose that is discovered by creating it. Evolution is basically competition, cooperation, symbiosis, death, sex, and birth. Yet it leads by way of extraordinarily unlikely coincidences to us, which might be considered the *anthropic principle* (though a naked mole rat, if it could write, would might see the naked mole rat principle).

I want to make a few observations on consciousness and death, as I have often in my writings. The viewpoints vary widely, but I wish to express my own and add some wild guesses. I won't be writing a grand essay but may reference where I have examined these ideas before. There are three points I wish to make, which seem true to me.

1. Death is good

It is not the opposite of life but the necessary polarity of life: it is part of the life cycle and most entities in Nature simply live their cycles until those cycles cease to repeat. Nature does not question and Nature does not regret. Life goes on.

Of course, none of this is to deny the trauma of losing a loved one or the horror of mass death caused by war, genocide, or natural disaster. Even the tragedy of accidental or early death leaving a life unlived strikes us as metaphysically unfair. Death can be cruel and cause great anguish. This is especially true for the living, but certainly the dying can experience such things too. Once death occurs, however, and biological functions cease, we must assume such physical pain ends.

Perhaps this is why our hints of submission to death are often sweet, especially for non-humans or early in life before we learn to fear the loss of self-control or the fearful *waste of time*. Our stories, poems, and songs often celebrate the pleasure of a long rest earned, pleasant intoxication, even the pleasure of just letting the time go by, and some even associate the shudder of orgasm with the sense of dying in bliss (see *la petit mort*). Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) expressed this rest from struggle in his oft-cited words:

*Sleep after toil, port after stormy seas,
ease after war, death after life
doth greatly please.*

The old moonshiner in the traditional song sometimes known as "Rye Whiskey" expressed the same peaceful acceptance of the end of things in this version (one of many):

*I'll eat when I'm hungry,
I'll drink when I'm dry,
And when I'm tired of living,
I'll roll up and die.*

Laura Nyro's (1966) song "When I Die" (made famous by Blood, Sweat & Tears in 1969) was bold enough to praise the loss of embodiment and the presumable peace it will bring, as well as implying the circle of life as eternal return, as new beings are born and the world spins on.

*I'm not scared of dying and I don't really care.
If it's peace you find in dying, well, then let the time be near. ...*

*And when I die and when I'm dead, dead and gone,
there'll be one child born and a world to carry on, to carry on.*

These references indicate that amidst our struggles and daily sufferings, deep inside we know that someday our troubles will end, as in the lines of the old spiritual originating in a Bahamian lullaby:

All my trials, Lord, soon be over.

This can be a soothing thought. I'll even admit it. On occasion, the mindless peace of deep, dreamless sleep sounds most inviting indeed.¹ Sometimes when the bills arrive or I watch the ridiculous content of TV, final escape into oblivion seems desirable indeed.

But of course this is just talk, for we humans *know* of the finality of death. In spite of all the recycling we now engage in, we ourselves do not expect to return from the dissolution of death. We have learned through complex symbolism and the magic conjurations of language that we are individual selves that exist in time for a lifespan and that someday that time will end. Oh, other beasts know instinctively when the great tiredness comes and relax into it without bitterness or desperate prayers to get into heaven or out of hell (not to mention being strapped to a table to endure tubes in veins or jolts of electricity to our hearts or brains to keep us "alive"). We, however, are the only animals that know *conceptually* of our inevitable demise, yet despite our mortal knowledge we have devised brilliant or insane means of avoiding the truth – from religious denial to power hungry conquest, to human sacrifice (see, e.g., Becker, 1973; Brown, 1959; Burkert, 2002).

Yet, it is this knowledge of our own limits, of our mortality, that may drive us to seek beyond those limits, to produce wondrous works of art and fantastic civilizations, to dream vast, and imagine impossible things that may yet bring them into being. It is the dream imperishable perfection, always out of reach, that keeps us desiring for impossible perfection. Perhaps that is the meaning of the famous lines of Wallace Stevens in "Sunday Morning" (1923). Limitations in life drive us to strive for the perfection we feel we once knew and will always approach:

*Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams*

¹ I acknowledge that "deep, dreamless sleep" is the third deepest stage of mystical awareness amongst experienced meditators, implying timeless, contentless awareness is not extinguished, though it may remain unconscious from the perspective of the self, as though for individuals it wasn't there (See, e.g., Thompson, 2015).

And our desires.

In any case, it seems very likely that somewhere or somewhen we humans underwent an existential crisis when they realized that death was inescapable – for their despotic *Dear Leader*, for our loved ones, and for ourselves. At the moment of potential despair, humans must have had a breakthrough in consciousness: to realize one must die is also to realize *one is now alive*.² Now is the time of our lives: *live now, for tomorrow we may die*. We are unlike any another animal in this respect. In some ways, it has drawn us together; however, in many others it seems to have driven us quite mad.

It was this sort of thinking that got me onto this project. All this talk about consciousness, brains, neuroscience, intersubjectivity, and even self-transcendent awareness getting more intense all the time but nobody asking what to me is the obvious question: *What does it all matter?* If consciousness (or selfhood or awareness-in-itself) simply ends at death, why we're back where we started: nowhere. Consciousness means nothing if "mind" is a bubble that pops into nothing in the sea of the universal mind, or if it's a brain byproduct, or if *my mind* just evaporates, disappears (either into oblivion or oneness), and just blinks out at death? Surely there is some implied relationship between the inner light of awareness and the end of physical life (even if they both go out together).

Since then, as all the world knows, science and, yes, New Age thinking have challenged organized religion for dealing with mortal knowledge and the resistance of the self to disintegration, and each of them have revealed an equal propensity for magical if not outright bizarre thinking. These extremes are evident in some of the essays that follow, but so is some very clear and open-minded thinking based in *disorganized* religion, or the further reaches of science, philosophy of mind, or New Age spirituality.

For materialists, we each are our brain and we die with it. Interestingly, I sent out invitations to all sorts of authors and online groups whom I thought might be interested, but the one group of thinkers who disdained to take me seriously were those generally known as ontological materialists (aka reductive materialists, mechanist materialists, material physicalists, etc.), that is, those who believe matter evolved randomly yet somehow produced life that randomly produced complex bodies that randomly evolved brains that, probably accidentally, produced the side effect of consciousness. Most, of course, simply refused to answer because it was *obvious* that when the brain died, the self died, and the since the self (and self-consciousness) is all there is to being aware, that was the end of it. Well, that at least makes sense (if you think within a box).

What did irk me to no end was to face the madness that a few extreme materialists have chosen, and none of them submitted a paper either. There are two kinds of materialism; one is the materialism that sees the biological brain as identical with consciousness. When the brain dies, the self dies, so what's a rich egotist to do if s/he wants to continue living? The only answer,

² For well-researched conjectures and excruciating detail on the symbolic awakening of humanity to self-consciousness through language, see Nixon, 2010a. For the prehistoric background how awakening to mortal knowledge brought upon the sense of the sacred and human consciousness, see e.g., Nixon, 2010b; Noble & Davidson, 1996; Pfeiffer, 1982; and Tattersall, 2002. It was mortal knowledge and self-consciousness that led us to believe in linear time, and linear time, of course, comes to a dead end. Nature knows only cycles.

apparently, is to instantaneously freeze-dry the entire fresh corpse of the living for future awakening when medical science will have advanced far enough to carry out such operations, i.e., the merchandising known as *cryonics*. But, really, that's a lot of trouble and expense when who knows when that future will be and one will still be stuck with a really old or decrepit body anyway. So there are some macabre institutions that – for a significant fee – will remove only the head or even just the brain and instantaneously freeze-dry it for a future awakening; and the best part of this ghoulish scheme is that the head can then be transplanted onto a new youthful body. (Please don't ask where those new youthful bodies will come from.)

I don't find the other, now more popular choice much more palatable. It's for the materialists who believe the brain is like a wetware computer that runs the "mind-program" through its neural circuits, like software. They are called by several names, including Ray Kurzweil's *Singularity* group, the *transhumanists* (or on Facebook *Rational Transhumanists*, *Tranhumanist-Posthumanists*, or even the *Vegan Transhumanists United*). Despite my politest invitation, none of these people wanted to explain to us in a short paper how the "mind-program" in a human brain, which is part of a human body, which is embedded in a natural environment, and which is part of a symbolically interactive community could possibly be transferred to a computer or computer network and still be basically the same person. Yet I was the one accused of science fiction for even suggesting that an unobserved cosmos of dead material parts interacting randomly without purpose was not even imaginable (except by choosing an observational perspective *and imagining it*)! To be is to be experienced. The non-experienced is unimaginable.

If consciousness *were* simply brain processes, it would not be able so to distance itself from brain processes to discover, or imagine that it has discovered, that it is brain processes (Tallis, 2012, p. 338).

As has been said many times, our brains, bodies, environments, and symbolic cultures shape our minds and help determine our experience. But it is a complex interdependence in which, in mutual creation, our relationships, minds and experience shape and determine our symbolic cultures, our natural environments, our bodies, and even alter our brains through plasticity and, occasionally – through epigenetics – in one lifetime!⁴

2. Obviously, hard science cannot account for awareness (or explain *why* life would evolve)

It has revealed many wonders and made incredible technologies possible, but it cannot prove its own assumptions upon which the whole materialist edifice is built. *Who can tell us what an unobserved universe looks like or even acts like* (except after the fact when we observe and probably change its telltale residues)? An unobserved, unexperienced, pre-life universe would have no form, no time, no substance, no ... anything since time is relative to observers, form relative to the sensory organs that view it, and the same thing applies to everything else we assume to be ultimately real like density, texture, sounds, distances, etc. And please don't say machines can measure all this for us, for such mechanical motions have to be built by human

⁴ See Jablonka & Lamb, 2012.

minds and have no *meaning* until they are read and interpreted by a mind. It's no used pleading we can extrapolate backwards from readings in the present for who is doing such readings? We are – in the present! What mind is extrapolating backwards to imagine what it would be like *if it were there*? Sorry, but an unobserved universe cannot exist, much less one that inexplicably produces life and various forms of awareness.

Galilean science (reductive materialism) has been the most successful worldview ever put into action in terms of production and technology. But what have we done to our world and life experience as a result? What sort of consciousness believes torturing other primates and mammals is necessary in laboratories throughout the world to help protect human beings from possibly dangerous ingredients in cosmetics? What sort of psychopathic paranoia drives a species to built such a stockpile of nuclear weapons and deadly viruses that it could it destroy all civilization and possibly all life many times over?

There is no doubt in my mind that the chasm of perspective between objectivity and phenomenology (between experience and material) still stands firm. In the 90s, it was called the *hard problem* (Chalmers), before that, the *explanatory gap* (Levine), and way before that it was known as the *unthinkable passage* (Tyndall). Nothing can explain that first shudder of experience, which is simply not material but the embers of subjectivity. Science occupied with measuring the minutiae or cosmic grandeur of the external world cannot explain the inner light of consciousness in itself, though neuroscience has certainly demonstrated fascinating connections between the brain and mind. Obviously, without a brain, we could not be conscious in the way we currently are, but then all we know is our own consciousness. Still, as Tyndall wrote in 1879:

The passage from the physics of the brain to the corresponding facts of consciousness is unthinkable. Granted that a definite thought and a definite molecular action in the brain occur simultaneously; we do not possess the intellectual organ, nor apparently any rudiment of the organ, which would enable us to pass, by a process of reasoning, from one to the other.

Some of the more visionary scientists, like Freeman Dyson (1988), saw that consciousness or awareness or experience cannot simply be explained away but must accepted as original, if not eternal, as in pre-spacetime. (Many, many more such provocative quotations could be cited):

It seems more reasonable to think that mind was a primary part of nature from the beginning and we are simply manifestations of it at the present stage of history. It's not so much that mind has a life of its own but that mind is inherent in the way the universe is built. (p. 72)

Of course, for those who do not begin with the externalized scientific point of view, none of this was ever a problem or gap. The world is here because some form of deity or primal consciousness brought it forth. Those who begin with the reality of experience instead of matter assume (creative) awareness is primary, though it manifests in various forms according to the place, time, context, and powers of the vessel:

Consciousness is not tied down by the physical body. For the subtle body, things can move faster than the speed of light. There are two kinds of time: physical time and inner

time. ... There are infinite universes and infinite time scales. (attributed to H.H. the Dalai Lama)

Matter is a manifestation of consciousness but not a product of it. As several papers in this issue indicate, the physical and the “mental” (for lack of a better term) are inextricably intermingled, perhaps in some form of what we poor wordsmiths call *dual-aspect monism*.

3. How you live consciously is how you die consciously

This is my second speculation, which I regard as almost a revelation. It seems to me that that both “life after death” and “oblivion after death” are true, or can be true. I am hardly the first to suggest it, but it bears repeating in this era when science sees us all dying the same, disappearing into oblivion. It is also suggested that *most* of those who experience NDEs find them delightful and look forward to losing themselves in the light (though there are exceptions). And, finally, there are all those cheery New Agers who embrace only the bright part of spirituality and believe we will rejoin the blissful source from which we began, forgetting our lives, which will have mattered not at all when we were just light illusions all along. This hardly seems fair when, really, there are so many wicked, stupid, twisted, hateful persons living out their lives. This may not be a matter of ethics, as such, but a matter of quality of consciousness.

It seems certain to me that *I* will die and stay dead. By “I”, I mean me, Greg Nixon, this person, this identity. I am so intertwined with the chiasmus of lives, bodies, ecosystems, symbolic intersubjectivity, and life on this particular planet that I cannot imagine this identity continuing alone without them. Literary critic, Joseph Crapanzao (2004), has suggested it is not the loss of the self we fear, but the world of others, those *others* who originally drew my self-concept (ego) forth from embodied experience:

[Can we say that] the terror of death is a substitute for the terror of world-ending? Is it less our own dissolution than that of the world — our intimate and perduring connection with it — that terrifies us? The most frightening of nightmares is to be absolutely alone — deprived of all context, human or material. (p. 202)

However, I can imagine, and often do, that there is a core consciousness, an infinite inner light, a soul if you wish, that has always been with me, that lies as deeply within my being as the farthest star without. Perhaps this inner *essence* can continue on as light energy or some such thing without my personal identity – but not necessarily without any of my memories.⁶ With the death of ego, of self, a new unimaginable awakening may occur, as Theodore Roethke expressed it so well and so raw in these lines of his poem “In a Dark Time” (1964):

*Death of the self in a long, tearless night,
All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.*

⁶ See Nixon (2010a) for details on how lived, yet impersonal, clouds of memories could enrich the Source of Being – or just read toward the end of T. S. Eliot’s extraordinary poem “Little Gidding” his *Four Quartets* (p. 59) on the next page.

(The self dies, but some “blazing unnatural light” is born: my own interpretation of course.)

Surely if you have hated your own life or even that of all others because you see the ugliness of all things, wouldn't it make sense to have your dreams come true when you died? This may not mean a hell of punishment, but simply oblivion, lights out. If you have been selfish all your life and only pretending to be interested in others only insofar as they may benefit you, surely you could not bear to let your dearly-beloved ego-self go. Since you called it into existence in life (ask any social constructivist) you will surely disappear with it when you die. On the other hand, If you have been curious, compassionate, open to new experience, and, most of all, courageous in life, you will probably be ready to face the most astonishing metamorphosis of conscious awareness than you have ever dared dream, a cosmic awakening or journey that begins *in the twinkle of an eye*, as the Bible said, that is, in momentous flash.

Paul Ricoeur (1998) in one his last interviews put it as eloquently as anyone could have:

Afterlife is a representation that remains prisoner to empirical time, as an “after” belonging to the same time as life. This intratemporal “after” can concern only the survivors. ... Here I come back to...the hope, at the moment of death, of tearing away the veils that conceal the essential buried under historical revelations. I, therefore, project not an after-death but a death that would be an ultimate affirmation of life. My own experience of the end of life is nourished by this deeper wish to make the act of dying an act of life. This wish I extend to mortality itself as a dying that remains immanent to life. (p. 156)

He added significantly: "I consider life, almost eschatologically, as an unveiling in the face of dying" (p. 160).

One survives one's life by believing in universal awareness, perfection, and the peace that passes all understanding. Perhaps we bring this life experience as artifacts of memory back with us to the Source from which we began, changing it, enriching it – which may be the implied meaning of T. S. Eliot's (1944) oft-quoted words (which I beg permission to cite just once more):

*And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

We know it for the first time for *it* and *we* have transformed and united again. Once we have lived – if we don't choose the eternal silence of oblivion by life denial, vanity, indifference, or simple weariness – the Source learns and we awaken within it. Awareness, consciousness, is universal – it comes with the territory (in fact, *it must be the territory*, though it could be nothing like the reduced animal-symbolic consciousness as we humans practice it) – so maybe you will be one of the few prepared to become unexpectedly enlightened after the loss of self. You may discover your own apotheosis – something you always were, but after a lifetime of primate experience, now ecstatically *much more*. Since you are *of* The Source and since you have changed from life experience and yet retained the dream of ultimate awakening, plus you have brought those chaotic emotions and memories back to the Source with you (though the

experiences are no longer *yours*), your life & memories will have mattered. Those who awaken beyond the death of self will have changed Reality. (As I see it anyway.)

Unfortunately, or perhaps not, mainly because of the weariness, stress, and frustration of life, I would wager the vast majority of individuals who die succumb gratefully to loss of self, that is, peaceful oblivion, and perhaps the dreams that come after shuffling off the mortal coil are made of swirling clouds of memories, as Hamlet surmised. They may not even be your memories alone. The Big Sleep beckons, and one must rest. Cosmic consciousness continues, but for the sleepers, it won't matter.

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