

Book Review

Review of *Understanding Consciousness (Second Edition)* by Max Velmans. New York, NY: Routledge, New York, NY, 2009. xiii + 393 pages. ISBN 978-0415425162.

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Understanding Consciousness can almost be said to have a plot/narrative, or a dramatic structure similar to the ‘three-act structure’ model used by numerous screenwriters. In Part I—the Setup—Velmans surveys “mind-body theories and their problems”, in part II—the Confrontation—he reconstructs “a new analysis: how to marry science with experience”, and in part III—the Resolution—he shares with us “a new synthesis: reflexive monism” (v-vi). Velmans starts off in the first chapter with perhaps one of the most basic, nevertheless hard, questions in the field of consciousness studies: “what is consciousness?” In his attempt to answer this question, he introduces three themes which are explored later on in the book in details and which serve as the unifying logic behind the entire text as it build-up towards his original concept, ‘reflexive monism’: 1) “one can understand consciousness without reducing it [to a brain function, property or state]”, 2) “we have to take stock of these ancient debates [monism vs. dualism, realism vs. idealism, and ‘public’ & ‘objective’ vs. ‘private’ & ‘subjective’], but we do not have to be bound by the polarized choices that they offer”, and 3) “it is possible to [study the experiencer and the experience] in a way that is consistent both with science *and* with ‘common sense’” (p. 3). The “what is consciousness?” question is only half a problem when it comes to the consciousness-brain dilemma, for Velmans approximates that there are at least five major problems or groups of problems. The most famous of which is the ‘hard problem’, which is philosopher David Chalmers’s ironic label—since the ‘easy problems’ are very hard but possibly solvable over time—for the question: “why should [and how does] physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all?” (p. 4). Velmans overviews the confusion resulting from the disagreement among scholars regarding the definition of consciousness, which in most cases is a result of some form of theoretical bias—the lens through which we view consciousness based on our presuppositions. For instance, the majority of Western scientists take on a physicalist approach when it comes to the mind-body problem so they either deny consciousness or ignore its phenomenology altogether, for the most part. Instead, Velmans takes on a commonsense approach to minimize this confusion by equating consciousness with ‘awareness’. For him:

the ‘contents of consciousness’ encompass all that we are we are conscious of, aware of, or experience. These include not only experiences that we commonly associate with ourselves, such as thoughts, feeling, images, dreams, body sensations, and so on, but also the experienced three-dimensional world (the phenomenal world) beyond the body surface. (p. 8)

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Language and Psychoanalysis, 2021, 10 (2), 63-67. 63
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7565/landp.v10i2.6514>

Velmans's project is ambitious, for he surveys with deep scrutiny some of the most important arguments or problems surrounding consciousness, and finally he offers us his take on the issue through his unified theory of consciousness: 'reflexive monism'.

Velmans is critical of classical dualism because its 'explanations' require explanation and because it 'splits' the world. According to him, "Descartes [with his *res cogitans* and *res extensa*] is often thought to be responsible for the mind-body problem in its modern form [i.e., neurophysiologic or quantum dualist-interactionism as well as emergentism]" (p. 14). Velmans examines the different forms of monism highlighting their strengths and weaknesses; he is especially critical of—radical/eliminativist, reductive, and emergent/property dualist—materialism/physicalism as a consequence of the logical argument that causation and correlation do not establish ontological identity—a point that he returns to repeatedly throughout the text. Velmans views Berkeley's idealism to be absurd and concludes that neutral monism is unsatisfactory or incomplete as a theory because it leaves many neurophysiological questions unanswered. He finds solace, however, in Spinoza's dual-aspect theory, which Chalmers and he interpret in quite different ways. Velmans's ontological monism/epistemological dualism gives us a useful analogy by which we can better understand consciousness; he compares the relationship between the brain and the mind, especially consciousness, to electromagnetism or wave-particle duality—which he calls "psychological complementarity". Velmans then challenges behaviorism's and cognitive psychology's functionalist theories of consciousness as an 'epiphenomenon' with the following dilemma: "is it possible for consciousness to do something to or about something it is not conscious of?" Whether we answer yes or no, "we are not aware of the activity of our own brains" and "so we conclude that consciousness as such does influence brain activity" even though "without it our existence would be like nothing" (p. 79).

Regarding computational functionalism, whether robots could be conscious or not, Velmans agrees with Searle that the approach of the 'Strong AI' project is flawed from the start because simulating human behavior or our functions is not a duplication of our biological structure, such as would be the case hypothetically at least with an artefact or surrogate human being/clone. It is for this reason that computers are excellent with syntax (arrangement according to rules) vs. semantics (meaning). Human beings are not only complex structurally, but also historically. What is the ontological identity of a robot that 'becomes conscious' out of the blue? Also, if robots excel at probabilistic tasks such as chess yet cannot accurately handle something as contextual as linguistic translation, how would they handle trans-linguistic or non-verbal communication (e.g., intuition)? I agree with Velmans's basic yet clever conclusion that "we are not just human *doings*, we are also human *beings*" (p. 113). Velmans contrasts his reflexive model with how dualists and reductionists deal with conscious phenomenology. In a diagram set up by Velmans of a CAT perceived by an external observer (E) and a subject (S) looking at the CAT (see figures 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3 on pp. 125-128), he exposes the inherent flaws of dualism and reductionism by drawing our attention to the added 'perceived cat' in the mind of (S) in the case of the former and the added 'perceived cat' in the mind of (S), which is nothing more than a conscious state or function of the brain, in the case of the latter. In both scenarios, there is an added 'perceived cat' in addition to both the 'phenomenal cat' and the 'noumenal cat.' The reflexive model takes a psychophysical approach with the realization that the noumenal cat will never be truly experienced given our limited five senses and our 3D experience of reality; however, Velmans argues that our consciousness has evolved over time, and became sophisticated, to the extent that our phenomenal experience is a very good approximation of the noumenal that the two can almost be reflexively equal. Nevertheless, he maintains a Neo-Kantian critical realist viewpoint regarding the nature of

Reality, which is interestingly not too different from the Hindu notion of Maya that the perceived world is nothing but an illusion. This is also supported by modern physics, for as we zoom in deeper and deeper into the quantum world, we find out that all matter is energy and that we can influence sub-atomic particles through our observation, which is known as ‘the observer effect’.

Velmans shares with us the ‘pinprick thought experiment’ to simply prove that not all conscious experiences take place in the brain, or that one can think of the brain *qua* body as a holistic or integrated system. How we project our phenomenal experience is a mystery but the ‘neural projection hologram’ analogy is useful when it comes to think of “perceptual projection” as “a psychological effect” (p. 134). Velmans’s critical realist reflexive monist model then does not offer an explanation but rather a description of “perceptual projection” which is “an empirically observable effect [of consciousness]” (p. 162). Even though it is a form of ‘indirect realism’, it is a more accurate model than direct realism as in ‘Transparency Theory’, which the modern form of ‘Naïve Realism’ because, as he argues, “If our experiences simply ‘mirrored’ the world, we would expect the relationships between properties described by physics to be more faithfully preserved in the way such relationships are experienced” (p. 158). To Velmans, Biological Naturalism, which shares some assumptions with reflexive monism, is “absurd” because the psychological, or phenomenal, world cannot simply be reduced to the real brain or to put it differently, the ‘real skull’ cannot extend “beyond the dome of the experienced sky” (p. 176). Although the implication of the latter implies some panpsychic form of Cosmic Consciousness, Velmans did not fully explore these mystical grounds in 2009, but in a recent chapter he raises the ontological question regarding the consciousness of the universe in an attempt to compare reflexive monism with the Eastern philosophies of Vedanta and Samkhya as well as the form of panpsychism known as Cosmopsychism (Velmans, 2021). Nevertheless, it is curious that, in 2009, he concludes his book with enigmatic quotes from Carl Jung and ‘*The revelation of the Soul of Shu*’ (Velmans, 2009, pp. 350-51). So even though he never really explores any transpersonal subject matter, he sort of flirts with it from time to time through his footnotes by referencing Hinduism or other such spiritual traditions.

Perhaps the strongest contribution of reflexive monism, in my opinion, is ‘intersubjectivity’ which Velmans champions over ‘objectivity’ because after all “third-person experimenters have first-person experiences” according to Michel Bitbol (as cited in Velmans, 2009, p. 231). Intersubjectivity transcends objectivity because it equally validates the accounts of a subject/experiencer and an observer. The premise is that those two roles can ultimately be interchangeable since both experiences are in essence phenomenological, but the interests of the subject and the observer differ. Following from this, intersubjectivity, which is supported by the ‘changing places’ thought experiment, becomes the Middle Way of studying consciousness because it is both the shared experience/observation of a materialistic/scientific/objective extreme (the 3rd person perspective) and another psychological/philosophical/subjective extreme (the 1st person perspective). In other words, reflexive monism substantiates the evolution of ‘natural science’ into ‘consciousness science’ through ‘critical phenomenology’ since consciousness is the core of human experience (p. 221).

Since I thought of the ‘Causal Paradox’ in terms of binary probabilities: physical causes of physical states (11), physical cause of mental states (10), mental causes of mental states (00), and mental causes of physical states (01). Does this make me a psychofunctionalist? No. It is just an analogy suggesting that perhaps a more holistic approach to what consciousness does

slightly alleviates its paradoxical nature. As is the case with these things, our wording affects our understanding; and the essence of language is dualistic, for when we speak of something it is as a subject split from an object. Velmans's analogy of 'the filmed version of Hamlet' in response to the fact that "experiences and their physical correlates encode identical information" (p. 305) is useful, for a TV and a videotape contain the "same sequential information structure", yet their ontological identities are not the same because the information exists on the tape whether it is played or not, but it appears on the TV screen only when it is played. Perhaps then the brain is the tape and the mind is the TV? Once again, this is the basis for the "psychological complementarity principle" (p. 312) or intersubjectivity. It is not the answer to the 'hard problem' but it is possibly the most accurate framework within which one can study consciousness using an upgraded version of science, a more holistic one like reflexive monism.

In conclusion, reflexive monism is a more holistic framework that scientists and philosophers can use to study consciousness, it works well in describing the external phenomenal 3D world as translated by our five senses; however, Velmans failed to include inner experiences such thoughts, memories, and feelings—let alone "extraordinary experiences"—into such a framework, possibly because such experiences would possibly suggest a classical body-mind (substance) dualism in addition to Velmans's epistemological dualism of noumenal vs. phenomenal. Or perhaps such inner experiences, along with their qualia, are beyond our scientific understanding at the moment, that it becomes more practical to focus on 'enactive' theories of perception and cognition instead of 'endogenous' systems. Maybe this is the limitation of the overarching psychophysical framework under which Velmans's reflexive monism operates? Velmans is too optimistic to presuppose that science might eventually help us know 'the thing-itself' vs. our representations of it. I question the role of human consciousness in the context of Velmans's panpsychic remark that "in so far as we are parts of the universe that, in turn, experience the larger universe, we participate in a reflexive process whereby the universe experiences itself" (p. 298). Does the universe think through us? If it does have a mind, does it have consciousness? And if it is conscious, is it Collective Consciousness—à la Shelldrake's (1987) "morphic resonance" theory, which is the inverse of Jung's Collective Unconscious? Here, Velmans seems to be implicitly flirting with the metaphysical--and perhaps even the mystical—dimensions of consciousness. Unlike most Western scientists, he does give credit to India and Egypt (p. 329) for providing the roots of his reflexive monism theory.

In sum, I recommend this book to anyone who wants to be exposed to a concise summary of the history of consciousness studies and some of its most challenging issues. It is designed for scholars and students interested in the mind/body problem. Velmans does not only scrutinize the most prominent arguments on consciousness, he offers his personal take on each argument based on a critical phenomenological perspective, which relies on both empiricism and common sense. Reflexive monism is indeed a more holistic alternative to the current dominant reductionist view espoused by postpositivists. The theory of reflexive monism inspires a human scientific paradigm shift in our ontological understanding of consciousness, especially with regards to the misguided methodologies used by most postpositivist scientists today in their attempts to study what Husserl called the wonder of all wonders.

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