

**Luminescent Physicalism – A Book Review of
Waking, Dreaming, Being by Evan Thompson**

Journal of Consciousness Studies, in press.

Evan Thompson

*Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation,
and Philosophy*

New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, 495 pp.,

ISBN 978-0-231-13709-6

Reviewed by Gregory Nixon

Prince George, BC, Canada

This is a fine book by an extraordinary author whose literary followers have awaited a definitive statement of his views on consciousness since his participation in the important book on biological autopoiesis, *The Embodied Mind* (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991) and his recent neurophenomenology of biological systems, *Mind in Life* (2007). In the latter book, Thompson demonstrated the continuity of life and mind, whereas in this book he uses neurophenomenology as well as erudite renditions of Buddhist philosophy and a good dash of personal experience to argue for the reality of altered states of consciousness, but also that these states are not distinct from the physical

systems that subtend them. He must have touched a nerve, for *Waking, Dreaming, Being* continues to be read and widely discussed by the literate public.

This book has caused significant dismay among scientific materialists, and among those who believe mind or being transcends mere physicality, but also, notably, among some philosophical phenomenologists. The first are unhappy because Thompson takes his meditation experiences and the rigorous philosophy developed within Buddhism just as seriously as he does cognitive science or biology. The transcendentalists, including some Buddhists, are disappointed because Thompson stands with a statement from the Dalai Lama, whom he interviewed, that ‘even the subtlest “clear state of mind,” which manifests at the moment of death must have some kind of physical base’ (p. xxii). But while the Dalai Lama concluded his talk with Thompson with cheerful uncertainty – ‘Whether there is something independent or not, I don’t know’ (ibid.) – Thompson himself seems to side with materialism and proceeds on his fascinating exploration into varied conscious experiences looking but failing to find any that can withstand objective scrutiny of their transcendence of the physical, especially cerebral, sphere. In this process, there is some question whether his phenomenological credentials are put aside as he appears to stand with objective proof as a final arbiter as opposed to knowledge based in personal experience.¹

¹ Michel Bitbol (2015), a philosopher of science and phenomenologist, writes positively of Thompson’s book but takes issue with his leap into objectivity over the limitations of a purely phenomenological perspective, which would have left his conclusions more open.

On this journey, Thompson produces a most reader-friendly book, laced with personal asides and conversations with other well-known figures. He writes both with clarity and vigour demonstrating vast knowledge over many fields from neuroscience to arcane Buddhist and Indian yogic texts to current consciousness studies. Early on he moves toward a definition of that most difficult of concepts, consciousness, by seeing it as making appearance possible and noting that those sorts of sciences that attempt to exclude consciousness from their purview could hardly proceed without it:

Without consciousness, the world can't appear to perception, the past can't appear to memory, and the future can't appear to hope or anticipation.

The point extends to science: without consciousness there's no appearance of the microscopic world through electron microscopes, no appearance of distant stars through telescopes, and no appearance of the brain through magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scanners. Simply put, without consciousness there's no observation, and without observation there are no data. (p. 14)

He defines consciousness in a way that embraces self-identity: 'Consciousness is that which is luminous, knowing, and reflexive. Consciousness is that which makes manifest appearances, is able to apprehend them in one way or another, and in so doing is self-appearing and prereflectively self-aware' (p. 18). The word 'luminous' indicates his background as a meditator since childhood in Tibetan awareness techniques.

What does he explore? First he goes through perceptual experiences, illusions, and states of consciousness achieved by meditators, including the state of quiescent awareness possible in deep dreamless sleep and the 'fourth state', called simply that, indicating that this is said to be void consciousness (no time, no substance, no objects, and no subject) identified metaphorically in Buddhism as 'the clear light'. He admits that there is no scientific proof, as yet, of such states and that such proof may be impossible to obtain, but he notes that there is no evidence of anyone attaining such a state (or non-state) without having a physical substrate. He makes no claim to such attainment himself, but, toward the end, suggests such realizations may be the result of stilling the brain via meditation into a state of pure subjectivity without objective content. The Dalai Lama himself admits that, though he believes many advanced meditators have attained the clear light, he himself has no personal knowledge of it.

Thompson goes on to explore the dreaming state in some detail, sharing his own experiences of dream insight and lucid dreaming. He investigates so-called *out of body experiences* (OBEs), including his own, again concluding that such experiences likely are made of intuition, imagination and dream images – noting there is no proof of the body literally being transcended. At this point, the reader begins to wonder if Thompson is being serious or ironic since his own OBE as a child provided him with insights he could have gained no other way. Much to the disappointment of true believers, Thompson also dismisses the *near death experience* (NDE) as nothing more than the active imagination released when the

parts of the brain are left dysfunctional from heart failure, chemical ingestion, or other accidents, none of which have been proven to happen with an inactive brain or from a perceptual point beyond the body. He does not doubt, however, that the many reports reflect actual experiences, illusory or not.

His most compelling chapter asks ‘What Happens When We Die?’ He begins by honouring the ineffability of the experience of death by questioning the scientific perspective on it: ‘Yet even if we set aside the issue of whether science gives us good reason to believe that death entails the complete cessation of all consciousness, this conception is totally inadequate because it says nothing about the experience of *dying*’ (p. 275). He notes that Tibetan Buddhism, on the other hand, has built a vast literature around this very transition, from the moment of death to seeking and finding new physical embodiment in another incarnation. However, those who have trained themselves to recognize the luminosity of the ‘fourth state’, that is, the pure awareness in the clear light, will not be reborn but transcend into the All, according to this view. Thompson, perhaps surprisingly, writes, ‘I’m very skeptical of this way of thinking’ (p. 287). He notes that any such post-mortem experience is impossible to report without a living body, leaving the theory based on inference or conjecture, in the process casting doubt on the reports of those who claim to have recovered memories of lives previously lived.

He follows this up with an investigation into the deaths of realized meditators whose bodies reportedly did not begin to decay immediately, often remaining unsullied for days or even weeks. Scientific investigation into these reports

continues, but Thompson, for the time being, dutifully accepts the skeptical responses of forensic scientists that bodies often resist corruption in the right environmental circumstances. Again, the reader wonders if Thompson is actually toeing the line of scientific skepticism or if he is being ironic, for in at least some of these cases the corpse of the realized meditator was in southern India, hot and humid and perfect for rot. If these reports are proven to be true, it may be an indication that something more than observable physical life is afoot. But, finally: 'It can also help us remember that only the dying can teach us something about death, and what we're called upon to do is to bear witness to their experience' (p. 318). This is a truly phenomenological perspective.

In his final chapter, he explores the contentious area regarding the self. Influenced by Buddhist thought, he seeks a middle way between what he terms the 'neuro-nihilism' of certain scientists and philosophers who deny there is a self (for they see no brain function that could support it) and the intuitive self-reification of others who regard the self as a substantial entity existing basically unchanged along with the body. Based on the ideas of the sixth century Buddhist philosopher, Candrakīrti, Thompson sees the self as *dependently arising* or, more precisely, dependently co-arising from a juncture of causes. It begins with a self-specifying system at the cellular level. At this point, he ties self-making back to the body and denies that consciousness is merely an information processing system, 'for consciousness depends fundamentally on specific kinds of electrochemical processes, that is, on a specific kind of biological hardware' (p.

343). This becomes the basis by steps of the enactive self, 'a full-fledged I-making system' (p. 344).

He acknowledges social self-making (the narrative self of phenomenology), and he uses the extensive research of Tomasello (1999) to show that *joint attention* helps draw forth a mirror identity, the sense of self as seen by others. If he had read more recent work from Tomasello (2014), he would have seen Tomasello now supports the deeper social entanglement of *joint intentionality*, which hints at an actual sense of group identity that then makes individual self-identity possible. Beyond all this, however, Thompson as an experienced meditator must then deal with the claim that many advanced yogis have transcended the illusion of self and 'the body is said to have entered a state of suspended animation' (p. 357). With the enactive self and the socially constructed self-concept, this should be no surprise, for 'if the self is a construction, then we should expect that it could be dismantled, even while some of its constituent processes – such as bare sentience or phenomenal consciousness – remain present' (p. 362). For Thompson, enlightenment is not self-extinguishment. 'Rather it consists in wisdom that includes not being taken in by the appearance of self as having independent existence while that appearance is nonetheless still there and performing its important I-making function' (p. 366)

Overall, the position apparently taken Thompson on the matter of consciousness might be called luminescent physicalism. This is not the cold objective materialism favoured by many in the sciences that assumes that life, experience

and consciousness randomly evolved out of material interactions. Here the only physical world that can be known is one in which life is already present, and, for Thompson, life is coterminous with mind – when one is present so is the other. One of the implications of this is that those sciences that attempt to explain away the activities of living organisms as driven only by the evolutionary imperatives of survival and reproduction have to make room for individual intentions and perhaps even teleological purpose in nature. At the same time, it is no use speculating about the material universe before life appeared, for, from a phenomenological perspective, such would be an impossibility; there is no form to existence, no presence without consciousness.

Finally, it must be said that summarizing Thompson's *position* in consciousness studies does not do this book justice. It is a big book but one written in a manner meant to reach a wide, non-specialist audience. Thompson explores a veritable kaleidoscope of real and possible experiences, most of which are familiar enough to entertain; experiences that – agree with his conclusions or not – engage us in a way that academic writing rarely achieves.

References

- Bitbol, M. (2015), 'When "altered" states become fundamental'. *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 36, 101-112.
- Thompson, E. (2007), *Mind in Life: Biology, phenomenology, and the sciences of mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Tomasello, M. (1999), *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Tomasello, M. (2014), *A Natural History of Human Thinking* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., & Rosch, E. (1991), *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive science and human experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).