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Max Velmans, *Understanding Consciousness*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group: London & Philadelphia, 2000, 308 pp., $64.05 hbk, $32.05 pbk (USA), £40 hbk, £16.50 sbk (UK), ISBN 0-415-18655-2 (hbk), ISBN 0-415-18655-6 (pbk)

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This is a fine book. In what has become a crowded field, it stands out as direct, deep, and daring. It should place Max Velmans amongst the stars in the field like Chalmers, Dennett, Searle, and Churchland who are most commonly referenced in consciousness studies books and articles. It is direct in that the *de rigueur* history and review of the body-mind problem is illuminating and concise. It is deep in that Max deconstructs the usual idea of an objective world as distinct from our experienced world. It is daring in that in his last chapter he comes out on the side of consciousness co-evolving with the universe rather than arising at some point within it (though he insists that such speculation is beyond the more empirical intent of his earlier chapters).

Max Velmans should already be well-known to many through his many articles including those in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2(3) and 6(2/3) and a series in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, plus two edited books, one on the science and one on the phenomenology of consciousness. He has spent the past decade, it appears, preparing for this opus in a minor key. I would rate the book as a strong success, especially as his clear exposition and short chapters make reading more of a pleasure than a labour. It is a good introductory text to the field. At the same time, however, it makes propositions that—though not original—seem as startling as they are self-evident.

**Anti-reductionism.** Max, like others, insists that the phenomenology of consciousness is just as important as any theories *about* consciousness. First person experience is vital to any understanding of consciousness. After all, the *phenomenal world* cannot exist without an observer. The brain itself is part of the experienced world and this is one the reasons he makes it clear that any sort of reductionism, including functionalism, just won’t do as a prospective account of consciousness. He calls for an ontological monism, the universe, with a dual epistemology, the first- and third-person perspectives within it. Several times he denies that neural processes can be identical to consciousness even if they cause or correlate with them. His mantra is “*correlation* and *causation* do not establish *ontological identity.*” As perceived, the world cannot help but be subjective. Even the world as revealed through scientific instruments is interpreted and theorized over by conscious minds. In this way, separating subjective and objective realities creates a false dichotomy. The world as experienced is intersubjectively verified and it is this we accept as reality. This world is not the thing-in-itself, as Kant forever made clear. It is not knowable in itself. That world seems to consist of energy exchanges and every perceptive-cognitive system creates a unique reality from it.

**Epiphenomenalism.** This is why Max refers to his stance as “reflexive monism”. There simply is no reality to be experienced without an experiencing consciousness. At this point, it may seem he has idealized the mind and its place in existence, but those who hope for such a perspective will be sadly disappointed. Noting that most of the information processing of the mind is non-conscious or pre-conscious, he finds little for consciousness to actually *do*. Consciousness, he suggests, may be either the result of focal-attentive processing or, similarly, the result of inhibiting less important processing from achieving conscious attention. He notes the time-delay, made famous by Libet, in actual awareness of decisions already pre-consciously made. But, contra Libet, he also contends that even seemngly “spontaneous” conscious vetoes must have been preceded by some sort of pre-conscious processing. The universe is, as physics has taught us, a closed physical system so Max appears to come out on the side of determined causation in the free-will debate.

This is strong medicine from one who so valorizes consciousness and the absolutely vital role it plays in giving us a reality. Without consciousness, there would be nothing, no existence *for* anything. Yet, according to Max, consciousness is an epiphenomenon with no actual role to play. It did not evolve—except in the sense that its form has changed along with that of the material entities which carry it—but in some essential sense was always present.

**Some criticisms**. Aside from Max’s refusal to see some conscious moments as spontaneous or even transcendent, there are further minor irritations like referring to the American philosopher C. S. Peirce as C. S. “Pierce” and twice calling the world chess champion computer program “Big Blue” instead of Deep Blue. But the major problem with the book for me was its lack of terminological complexity. (Some will find that a blessing.) This book was written by a psychologist and not a scientist or philosopher. Max defines consciousness in a way that is so broad as to be open-ended and thus almost meaningless. The lack of conceptual density when dealing with the name we employ for our own awareness put many important issues by the wayside. Toward the end Max admits that he has said little about either “social and cultural contexts” or extraordinary states of consciousness. These are important omissions, especially since some more specific word-splicers agree that the creation of an inner subjective world of memories and imaginings as distinct from the objectively perceived world occurs only through the intersubjective communion of language. Max dismisses this because “it is difficult to believe that [non-human animals] experience nothing at all” (p. 264). He speaks blithely of “non-human language” as though communicative signals were the equivalent of formal, creative language structures. I, for one, had trouble of conceiving of a consciousness in which there was no inner subjectivity, in which, in essence, subject and object are experienced reactively as one continuum. The notion of experience as such seems appropriate, though it would be experience which is not re-cognized or *known* by a self-aware consciousness.

Though Max attempts to excuse his last chapter as speculative, his notion of consciousness being coterminous (he calls it “continuous”) with the physical universe opens conceptual quagmires that he is in danger of collapsing into. He spends a good deal of time attacking the formulation of David Chalmers, even though Chalmers has also suggested that experience may be a natural, universal property. He notes that Chalmers simultaneously claims consciousness as an emergent supervenience on the brain which Max sees as a contradiction to Chalmers’s “panpsychofunctionalism” (Max’s term). What Max does not see is the contradiction in his own position.

Early in the book, Max takes the position that consciousness must be conscious *of* something in order for it to occur. Late in the book, defending his sense that consciousness goes right down the evolutionary ladder, he states that “if the ability to learn and respond to the environment were the criterion for consciousness, there would be no principled reason to rule this out” (p. 268). Aside from the fact that the latter is a very simple criterion which could just as easily apply to computers (which he denies can be conscious), there is the difficulty of imagining the properties of consciousness in the universe before there were creatures to embody them. Through what exteroceptive nodes would such “consciousness” be *of* something? What learning and reactivity takes place before life?

**Conclusion.** Admittedly, these last questions are engaging Max’s final speculations and he may well be able to speculatively answer them. My quibbles are intellectual rather than stylistic or with the strength of his major argument for an ontological, reflexive monism which includes awareness. His epistemological dualism remains a dualism but he makes a convincing argument for overcoming it by calling for asymmetrical but complementary perspectives of first- and third-person on conscious phenomena. He could have noted that both perspectives are subject to the consensus negotiations of the second-person. All in all, a stimulating read which emphasizes some fundamental truths which are too often overlooked in consciousness studies. It is also important in that it opens channels to discussion about matters which have been excluded by mainstream science on faith alone.

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