META: RESEARCH IN HERMENEUTICS, PHENOMENOLOGY, AND PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY
VOL. XVI, NO. 2 / DECEMBER 2024: 542-548, ISSN 2067-3655, www.metajournal.org

Consciousness Across Cultures: Phenomenological and Indian Philosophical Insights in *Waking, Dreaming, Being*

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Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy. Evan Thompson. New York: Cambridge University Press, 18th November 2014 (496 pp., US $22.95 (*Paperback*) US $32.95 (*hardcover*) US $21.99 (*ebook*), ISBN: 9780231136952 9780231137096)

Keywords: Cognitive Science, Dreaming, Embodied Mind, Enactive View, Indian Philosophy, Out-of-body Experiences, Pure Awareness, Tibetan Buddhism, Upanishads

Evan Thompson's *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy* (2014) offers an intricate exploration of consciousness through the lenses of cognitive science, Western and Indian philosophy, and meditative traditions. Thompson's central thesis posits that the 'self' is not a static entity but a dynamic process emerging from the relationship of awareness, experiential contents, and self-identification. This review critically examines Thompson's arguments and methodologies, engaging with other scholarly works to evaluate the book's contributions and limitations.

The book's structure follows a detailed investigation into various states of consciousness, using a framework derived from Indian philosophy. Thompson delineates the waking state, dream state, and deep, dreamless sleep, adding a fourth state of pure awareness as described in the *Upanishads*. This framework serves as an organizing principle to explore how consciousness and the self manifest and transform across different states. Thompson argues that consciousness is not solely dependent on the brain, a view supported by dialogues with the Dalai Lama and insights from Tibetan Buddhism. Instead, the book proposes

an enactive view of the self (324-326), akin to the process of dancing, where the self is constantly constructed and reconstructed. This enactive view contrasts sharply with the reductionist perspectives that dominate Western neuroscience (325).

Thompson's interdisciplinary approach is commendable, bridging gaps between cognitive science and ancient contemplative traditions. By juxtaposing neuroscientific findings with insights from Indian yogic and Buddhist philosophies, Thompson challenges the reductionist view of consciousness prevalent in Western science. His assertion that the self is enacted through awareness rather than residing as an immutable entity aligns with the phenomenological perspectives of Merleau-Ponty (1962) and the non-dual philosophies of *Advaita Vedānta*. This synthesis not only broadens the scope of consciousness studies but also invites a re-evaluation of cognitive science's foundational assumptions.

In the initial chapters, Thompson delineates the tripartite structure of consciousness according to Indian traditions: 'awareness, contents of awareness, and self-experience' (for more see chapter 3). This framework is effectively utilized to analyze various states of consciousness, including wakefulness, dreaming, and deep sleep. The concept of 'I-making' or *ahaṃkāra*, as discussed in Indian philosophy, is intricately woven into cognitive science's understanding of self-construction. This enactive view of the self echoes Francisco Varela's notion of 'autopoiesis,' wherein living systems continuously create and recreate themselves (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch 1991). As the author puts it:

> "To put the idea another way, when I say that the self is not a thing but a process, what I mean is that the self is a process of "I-ing," a process that enacts an "I" and in which the "I" is no different from the I-ing process itself, rather like the way dancing is a process that enacts a dance and in which the dance is no different from the dancing" (325).

Thompson's discussion on the hypnagogic state and its dissolution of ego boundaries offers a profound insight into the fluidity of self-experience. The hypnagogic state's description, where the ego-structured consciousness dissolves, resonates with Merleau-Ponty's concept of the pre-reflective self. However, the author goes further by incorporating empirical data from sleep

studies, presenting a compelling case for the neuroscientific investigation of these altered states. In the words of Thompson:

> "In everyday life we tend to think of waking and dreaming as two distinct and discrete states. If we're dreaming, then we're not awake; and if we're awake, then we're not dreaming. Yet the ancient Indian image from the *Upanishads* suggests otherwise: like a great fish swimming back and forth between the banks of a wide river, we journey between waking and dreaming. This image hints of deeper currents beneath the surface while allowing for intermediate areas and eddies where waking and dreaming flow into each other. One place where this confluence happens is the hypnagogic state" (110).

The examination of lucid dreaming in chapters four through six exemplifies Thompson's strength in synthesizing diverse perspectives. Lucid dreaming, where the dreamer becomes aware of dreaming, is used to explore the nature of self-awareness. Thompson's reference to Tibetan Buddhist practices of 'dream yoga' provides a cultural and spiritual context, enhancing our understanding of the cognitive mechanisms involved (151-165). The comparison between lucid dreaming and mindfulness meditation underscores the parallels between self-regulation and metacognitive awareness. This section could have been further enriched by engaging with Stephen LaBerge's pioneering work on lucid dreaming, which provides extensive empirical data supporting Thompson's claims (LaBerge 1985).

Chapter seven's analysis of out-of-body experiences (OBEs) reinforces the book's central thesis that self-experience is contingent on perceptual and attentional processes. Thompson convincingly argues that OBEs are not disembodied experiences but rather altered embodiments, where the self's location shifts according to perceptual perspectives. He contends, "Like dreams, out-of-body experiences are mental simulations or creations of the imagination, but like lucid dreams, they're subject to voluntary control, and you can know when you're having one" (205). This argument aligns with Thomas Metzinger's theory of the 'phenomenal self-model,' which posits that the self is a virtual construct created by the brain (Metzinger 2009). However, Thompson's critique of neuro-nihilism[1] and his insistence on the primacy of consciousness suggest a more nuanced understanding, emphasizing the need for a balanced view that acknowledges both neuroscientific and phenomenological insights.

The book's enactive view of the self aligns with the works of Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991), who propose an embodied approach to cognition. Their concept of the embodied mind emphasizes that cognition arises from the dynamic interaction between the brain, body, and environment. Thompson extends this notion by incorporating insights from Indian philosophy, suggesting that the self is not only embodied but also constantly enacted through awareness (67-75). In contrast, Metzinger (2009) argues that the self is an illusion created by the brain, a view the author critiques as "neuro-nihilism" (322). Metzinger's theory of the self-model posits that our sense of self is a mental construct with no real existence. As he puts it: "there is no such thing as a self. Contrary to what most people believe, nobody has ever *been* or *had* a self… to the best of our current knowledge there is no thing, no indivisible entity, that is *us*, neither in the brain nor in some metaphysical realm beyond this world" (Metzinger 2009: 1). Thompson challenges this view by drawing on Indian philosophical concepts of 'I-making' (*ahaṃkāra*) and pure awareness, arguing that while the self is constructed, it is not an illusion but an ongoing process of enactment (325-331).

Thompson's critique of the standard neuroscientific view of dreaming as a form of delusional hallucination is compelling (179). According to Thompson, "What exactly is a dream? A dream isn't a random false perception; it's a spontaneous mental simulation, a way of imagining ourselves a world" (184). The dreaming must be understood as imagination rather than delusional hallucination perception. Dreaming is an imaginative state fuelled by memory and emotions rather than a hallucinatory state cut off from sensory inputs. 'Imagination' is a part of dreaming consciousness; in nonlucid dreams, it is the basis for our perception of our dream ego. We encounter the dream world with both our dream self and dream ego when we have lucid dreams. Dreaming is the result of 'spontaneous imagination' at work; it is not an 'offline hallucination.' We are imaginative humans, not just machines that dream. *We view the world imaginatively rather than experiencing hallucinations*. However, it could engage more critically with contemporary theories in dream research. Hobson's (2002) 'activation-synthesis hypothesis,' which posits that dreams result from the brain's attempt to make sense of random neural activity, represents a significant viewpoint in the field. Addressing this theory in greater detail would provide a more balanced critique and

underscore the book's argument that dreaming is a form of spontaneous imagination (127: 183-184).

The book's most controversial assertion lies in chapter eight, where Thompson entertains the possibility of consciousness persisting in deep and dreamless sleep. Drawing from Indian philosophical traditions, he challenges the prevailing scientific view that consciousness fades completely in this state. He states: "For *Yoga* and *Vedānta*, whereas dreaming is a form of object-directed consciousness—the objects in dreams being mental images—dreamless sleep is a mode of consciousness without an object. Similarly, according to Tibetan Buddhism, deep sleep is a state of 'subtle consciousness' without sensory or cognitive content, and it's the basis upon which dreaming and waking consciousness arise" (251). While Thompson presents preliminary evidence from meditative practices suggesting subliminal awareness, this claim remains speculative. Further empirical research is needed to substantiate these assertions, particularly in the context of Western scientific paradigms. Engaging with the works of philosophers like Thomas Nagel, who argue for the subjective nature of consciousness, could have strengthened this discussion (Nagel 1974).

Thompson's exploration of death and the dissolution of the self in chapter nine is both poignant and thought-provoking. His critique of the biomedical perspective on death highlights the inadequacy of understanding death solely as a biological event. The incorporation of Tibetan Buddhist accounts of the dying process provides a holistic view, emphasizing the subjective and experiential aspects of death (275-285). This chapter invites readers to reconsider the nature of consciousness and selfhood in the face of mortality, a theme that resonates with existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre, who emphasized the inevitability of death in shaping human existence (Sartre 1956).

The book employs a phenomenological approach, emphasizing first-person accounts of consciousness and self-experience. This methodology is valuable for exploring subjective aspects of consciousness that are often overlooked in third-person scientific studies. The inclusion of personal narratives and experiential insights enriches the discussion and provides a holistic understanding of consciousness. However, the reliance on phenomenology also has its limitations. The subjective nature of phenomenological accounts can make them difficult to verify or generalize. While Thompson acknowledges the need for empirical

validation, the book could benefit from a more systematic integration of experimental data to support its phenomenological claims.

The book makes significant contributions to both cognitive science and philosophy by proposing a new framework for understanding consciousness and the self. By integrating insights from Indian philosophy, it challenges the reductionist tendencies in Western neuroscience and offers a more holistic view of the mind. Thompson's call for a contemplative science that combines cognitive science with meditation practices is particularly noteworthy. This approach has the potential to enrich our understanding of consciousness and provide new methodologies for studying the mind. The book's exploration of meditative states and their impact on consciousness aligns with the growing interest in the neuroscience of meditation (Wallace 2012).

To sum up, I believe *Waking, Dreaming, Being* is a thought-provoking work that pushes the boundaries of consciousness studies by integrating cognitive science with contemplative traditions. Thompson's enactive view of the self as a process rather than a static entity which closely aligns with *Advaita* and *Buddhism* offers a compelling alternative to reductionist models, inviting a rethinking of the nature of consciousness. Despite some speculative elements and occasional lack of critical engagement with opposing views, the book's interdisciplinary approach and rich synthesis of diverse perspectives make it a valuable contribution to both academic and contemplative discourses. And for this, I would thank Evan Thompson for bridging the gap between Indian philosophy and Western neuroscience with his insights from the contemporary philosophy of mind. Future research should continue to explore the intersections between cognitive science and contemplative practices, furthering our understanding of the complex nature of consciousness.

Declarations: No conflicts of interest, and no funding has been received for this work.

NOTES

[1] "Neuro-nihilism posits that for the self to exist, it must be an independently real entity or indivisible thing. However, since no such entity is found in the

brain, neuro-nihilism concludes that if we perceive ourselves as possessing or being an independently real self, this perception must be an illusion generated by the brain" (322-323).

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