

ANITA PACHOLIK-ŻUROMSKA¹

**Bridging East and West. In the Search for
a New Approach to Consciousness.
Remarks on the sidelines of the book by Evan Thompson
*Waking, Dreaming, Being. Self and Consciousness in
Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy*, Columbia
University Press, New York 2014, pp. 496**

Abstract

The aim of this paper is a short overview of the book of Evan Thompson *Waking, Dreaming, Being. Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy*, with some polemic remarks. Thompson presents an interesting approach to the problem of cognition, knowledge and self-knowledge – the problems considered in philosophy, psychology, neurosciences, which – if they interact – create an interdisciplinary platform called “cognitive sciences”. However, Thompson proposes to bring on the debate within the field of a new discipline: contemplative neuroscience, for which he argues in the presented book. Using the methodology offered by this new kind of science he analyzes such phenomena as dream, perception, imagination, and even dying – all of them in reference to the problem of what consciousness is.

Keywords:

consciousness, Self, dream, perception, self-knowledge, neurophenomenology, computational neuroscience, Evan Thompson

¹ Department of Cognitive Science and Epistemology, Institute of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland, apz@umk.pl.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term “contemplative neuroscience” sounds a little odd. What science is this, if its method consists in contemplation? Shouldn’t scientific methods be objective? How could contemplation be such? According to Evan Thompson, contemplative neuroscience is thought as a new field of interdisciplinary dialogue between brain and behavioural sciences with practitioners of many methods of contemplation (Thompson, 2014, p. 70). Such a platform is much more than just a study on brains of meditating monks. First, it should be a combination of a scientific exterior with phenomenological interior of such an experience as meditation (which of course takes many forms and evokes many particular experiences). Second, it should be “a science of the mind with roots firmly planted in modern science and ancient contemplative wisdom” (Thompson, 2014, pp. 77–78). Shortly speaking, it should be a sort of neurophenomenological research combining the first-person perspective with the third-person perspective or, in other words, the inner perception with outer perception, where the perceiving subject is the same person presenting both points of view.

After so many normative postulates, we already know what contemplative neuroscience should be, but for what? What is the point of establishment of this new interdisciplinary field? Why replace the computational with the contemplative neuroscience? Thompson gives an answer, which is really to be appreciated: The aim is a new kind of self-knowledge. Such knowledge, however, which is still understood as subject’s knowledge about his own mental states yet goes beyond the traditional western-philosophical understanding of what knowledge is. In Thompson’s view it should be an effect of a combination of scientific and contemplative practices. The former allow us to collect objectively measured empirical evidences of brain activity during our daily actions, where sleep is also seen as an action. The latter let us to carefully observe our mental states – in a much more subtle way than usually. In other words, contemplative practices will turn us into qualified self-observers.

2. THE NEW KIND OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

In the classic epistemology knowledge is defined as a justified, true belief. There are many reasons why such an account does not fit to self-knowledge. One of the main problems is with the justification of our beliefs about us. They could be true by virtue of their appearance, so we can be sure that we have them, but still the

problem remains whether their content is true. All of the cases with self-delusions and self-illusions seem to impair the first-person authority in self-knowledge.² These are for example: bodily self-illusion (misidentification of subject's own physical states), illusion of mental ownership (misidentification of the Self), mental self-illusion (misidentification of subject's own psychological states). The subjective misidentifications of the content, owner and even mode of one's own mental states challenge the account of self-knowledge based on the first-person authority and are the reason for a search for better conditions for self-knowledge.

The problem with justification is intrinsic to self-knowledge. It is, so to speak, embedded. But there are ways of avoiding it. First of all, self-knowledge should not be built exclusively on self-consciousness. Self-consciousness should be only a stage on the way to self-knowledge, which cannot be understood just as its higher level, because then self-knowledge inherits errors in content occurring in self-consciousness. To avoid such a bad heritage, self-knowledge should be somehow detached from self-consciousness. There are ways how to do it but they only show the solutions from the inside of western philosophical tradition.³

However, there are also other ways and one of them is offered by Thompson and rests on a special account of consciousness (Thompson, 2014, p. 94). The proposed approach to consciousness refers to its conception in Buddhism, where even phenomenal first-person experiences, as far as contentful, block the access to the Self. It happens so because even phenomenal states are not transparent, and transparency should be one of the characteristics (the other are: the infallibility and incorrigibility) of the first-person-authority. The content of the mental states turns the first-person into the third-person reports. It means that the introspection and intentionality of consciousness do not let us out of the perceptual model of self-knowledge and the usual categorization subject-object. Moreover, such reports are *de facto* a kind of memories – they are retrospective interpretative judgments made by a conceptual and embodied mind (Thompson, 2014, p. 95). This kind of a mind has its own consciousness, however not the type we are looking for in the new self-knowledge.

The desired consciousness is pure awareness deprived of physical nature (Thompson, 2014, p. 80). This statement has heavy ontological consequences, namely the substantial dualism. On the one hand, we have physical basis of neural information processing, on the other, an awareness, which should be detached from the body. Such an account solves of course the problem with the lack of the

² See for example: Petkova, 2008; Lenggenhager, 2007.

³ See for example: Bar-On, 2004a, 2004b; Peacocke, 1992.

immunity to error in self-knowledge because there is the desired gap between bodily self-consciousness, containing the content of bodily experiences coming from senses and this kind of self-consciousness which does not have any content at all. This discontinuity has its source in the division of consciousness into two natures: physical and non-physical, and, therefore, leads to a sort of dualism and recalls old problems concerning the connections between these two kinds of entities. Does Thompson really want to claim this? No! He has a much more ambitious plan.

3. REDEFINING THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM

According to Thompson, we need to redefine what we understand under the notion “physical”. This treatment is smart because we work on a very well known material as it is easier to collect the already existing definitions of the physical in contrary to the definitions of the mental, which are much more fuzzy and incoherent. Nonetheless, this treatment is not purely pragmatic. The proceeding has a serious and even disquieting reason – the question: And what if the physical is something more complicated than we used to think? Why should we concentrate on the mental if it is subjective and private? Maybe if we do not seek for dualism and want to preserve a kind of monism, instead of reducing the mental to the physical we should start from redefining of the physical according to what we mean by the mental? Thus, Thompson proposes “a nondualistic framework in which physical being and experiential being imply each other or derive from something that is neutral between them” (Thompson, 2014, p. 105). Such a framework is offered by neurophenomenology.

Neurophenomenology tries to cope with two challenges. The ontological one is based on the problem of how to avoid dualism and to not fall in reductionism. The epistemological one combines two perspectives in the investigation of the mind: the first- and third-person perspective. The first-person perspective rests on the introspection – a kind of an inner observation of one’s own mental states – and is subjective from its definition. The third-person perspective has a scientific character, which means that its method allows to repeat the experiment in front of different observers, what guarantees its objectivity.

However, in my opinion, as far as the neurophenomenological programme already reaches, it does not offer a satisfactory combination of either ontological standpoints or epistemological perspectives. This programme concentrates on the new account of consciousness which belongs to an embodied subject and hence is embodied as well. The conception of an embodied mind connects the idea of

a mental feature of the mind with the idea that the mind supervenes on the physical basis of the brain. It could be similar to Davidsonian account of the supervenience but it steps further. Namely, the embodiment says that it is not only brain but the whole body which shapes the mind. The body is embedded in the environment which means that the embodied mind interacts directly with the physical world. In other words, the directness of the mind–world interaction is assured exactly by its embodiment. Apparently it looks to a unification of the mental and the physical and the way of a means of avoiding the mind-body problem, while in fact it remains within the problem formulated by Strawson (1996).

According to Strawson, there are two ways of describing a subject (person) and both fail. The first one is Cartesian, saying that a person is a connection of two substances: mental and physical (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*). The problem is that when we describe a person we never refer to both substances at the same time but only to one of them. We describe a person using either mental or physical predicates:

When we speak of a person, we are really referring to one or both of two distinct substances, two substances of different types, each of which has its own appropriate types of states and properties; and none of the properties or states of either can be a property or state of the other. States of consciousness belong to one of these substances and not to the other. (Strawson, 1996, p. 94).

The second one is called “no-ownership or no-subject doctrine of the self” (Strawson, 1996, p. 95). According to it, we ascribe to the body a special causal power in the evoking experiences. However, there is no reason to infer that the thing owing these experiences is an individual – a Self. The experiences belong to the body and the body is their owner.

Both strategies are visible also in the programme of neurophenomenology, which leaves a doubt whether that programme is reliable. The reason for such a suspicion is treating consciousness in the same way as the mind, namely as embodied. This approach raises a question whether the description of consciousness as bodily would not be *de facto* a kind of a physical predicate. If it were so, then no mental entity would be described but just the experiencing body. In such a description we would not refer to consciousness but indeed to the body. How does Thompson deal with this question?

4. THE MYSTERY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The traditional model of self-knowledge is displayed in the Cartesian Paradigm. In the sixth Meditation Descartes points out the transparency of the mind, which means that all thoughts are evident to the thinker (a subject is aware of all of his thoughts), and that his thoughts are incorrigible (he cannot be mistaken about whether he has a particular thought). Descartes also emphasized the reflective character of thoughts (any thought necessarily involves knowledge of the thinker's Self) and, finally, intentionality manifested by the fact that thoughts come to the thinker as if they were representing something. This paradigm laid the foundations for the characteristics of the first-person authority by giving a special status to self-knowledge, which, as it has been mentioned above, could be challenged by the cases of self-illusion and some delusions as somatoparaphrenia. Despite these problems there is one more troubling feature – probably the most important feature of consciousness – namely its intentionality.

Intentionality of consciousness means its aboutness i.e. that consciousness must contain a content which may be either phenomenal or propositional. Moreover, according to Franz Brentano, every conscious act is accompanied by consciousness of this act. Consciousness is always a consciousness of something and cannot exist without an intentional act of reference to itself (Brentano, 1973, 1874). This Cartesian-Brentano account manifests the western approach to consciousness. Contrary to this, Thompson proposes an eastern point of view where consciousness, constituting the real self-knowledge, is a pure awareness.

Thompson's conception indeed wins against the two challenges: the ontological avoidance of dualism and the epistemological combination of the two, the first- and third-person perspectives – the two contrary methods of investigation of consciousness, namely introspection and scientific observation like, for instance, brain scanning. Thompson claims that even the pure awareness can be consistent with the brain, which means that the scientific third-person investigation can tell us something about the first-person state, i.e. what it is like to be in the state of pure awareness. Thompson's conception of the neurophenomenological programme leaves behind the western idea of consciousness, which cannot escape from the subject-object categorization. Remaining within the frame of embodiment, he describes a new sort of consciousness in a much more subtle way.

Thompson changes the traditional view on consciousness thus far investigated in computational neuroscience, which seemingly looks for neural correlates of consciousness, however this approach stuck in the Cartesian-Brentano paradigm. The contemplative neuroscience does it as well, but in a different way. Firstly, the

investigated object is new. It is luminous consciousness or pure awareness, which is “distinct from whatever transitory thought or mental image happens to arise. Luminosity is like the mirror’s clean surface, and knowledge like its capacity to reflect an object. One can experience directly this luminous and knowing awareness, distinct from any passing thought or mental image, through certain types of meditation” (Thompson, p. XXI). This is how the ontological challenge is avoided.

Secondly, the method is different, which means that epistemological treatment is also new. It is hard to imagine how it is possible to reconcile the two points of perception. For example, when a tested person experiences a particular state like in a meditation while his/her brain is being scanned. In the computational neuroscience it is done by two actors: the tested person and the scientist. However, in the contemplative neuroscience the best way to reconcile the two perspectives is when the tester and the scientist are one and the same person. The tested person should settle whether the image displaying the activity of his/her brain refers to what he/she experienced, and this is possible only when he/she is qualified to do it. But even if the tester and observer are different individuals, what changes the method of investigation is its object. In other words, the new ontology of consciousness influences the epistemology. How and where this is to be found in the book of Thompson who gives a lot of examples of such states of consciousness as, for instance, lucid dreams or out-of-body-experience described in the newly proposed ontology and still investigated by using the tools of science although more careful, which means that in the astonishing ontology and epistemology the West meets the East.

5. SUMMARY

It was not my intention to share the secrets of the book *Waking, Dreaming, Being*. If I did so, I would destroy the pleasure of reading it. I would also destroy the reason why it was written. It would be against the very point of the book. The reader needs to experience on his/her own how the content of the book slowly starts to become a part of their thoughts and influences their mind. The book not only tells how to better understand our consciousness. It gives a better understanding by itself.

The physical and the mental are not opposites. They are a kind of a continuum. They belong to the same structure of the world. The physical on a subpersonal level of information processing, although hidden from the access of consciousness is as present for a subject as consciousness is still present in a dreamless sleep.

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