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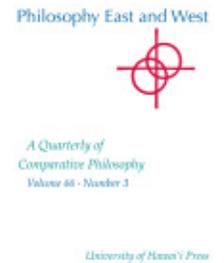
Introduction to Symposium on Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness  
in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy by Evan Thompson

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## AUTHOR MEETS CRITICS

### Introduction to Symposium on *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy*

by Evan Thompson



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The papers gathered here were first presented at an “Author Meets Critics” invited session that I organized for the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association meeting, held in Vancouver, April 1–5, 2015, on Evan Thompson’s book *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy* (Thompson 2014). Thompson opened the session with a précis of his book, which was followed by critical commentaries from John Dunne, Owen Flanagan, and Jay Garfield; Jennifer Windt was also an invited contributor to this symposium although she was not able to attend the session. Together with Thompson’s reply, these papers are presented here in their final, revised format.

Thompson’s book belongs to a new genre of philosophical literature, distinctive in its embrace of a cosmopolitan ideal of syncretic, cross-cultural, and empirically (and historically) informed systematic reflection. Recent examples include analytic and phenomenological approaches to self and self-knowledge in Western, Indian, and Buddhist philosophy (Siderits 2003; Albahari 2007; Siderits, Thompson, and Zahavi 2011; and Ganeri 2012); attempts to reconstruct Buddhist moral psychology as a type of virtue ethics (Keown 2001) or consequentialism (Goodman 2009); and innovative studies of perception, attention, self-awareness, and conceptualization that have laid the groundwork for cross-cultural philosophy of mind (Arnold 2012, Coseru, 2012, Garfield 2014, and Ganeri forthcoming).

*Waking, Dreaming, Being* contributes a new cross-cultural analysis of dreams, self-awareness, and subjectivity. What sets it apart from these other studies is its distinctly autobiographical stance. Indeed, *Waking, Dreaming, Being* is also a compelling narrative account of Thompson’s own journey into philosophy and the lessons to be drawn from acknowledging that scholarship is often thinly disguised autobiography: from adolescent explorations of Indian and Chinese philosophical classics (while home-schooled at the Lindisfarne Association, a cultural community dedicated to fostering a new planetary culture founded by his father, cultural historian William Irvin Thompson), to seminal forays into philosophy of mind and cognitive neuroscience that resulted in the launching of the enactive cognition paradigm, and finally to a decades-long effort to foster a sustained and meaningful dialogue

between Buddhist contemplatives and Western scientists and philosophers under the aegis of the Mind and Life Institute.

A distinctive feature of Thompson's book is his commitment to "staying with the open question," particularly in the face of challenges that Buddhist conceptions of a subtle or immaterial consciousness (often described as pure luminosity) confront when brought under the scrutiny of cognitive neuroscience. Remaining noncommittal in the face of overwhelming empirical evidence about the tight correlations between neural activity and conscious experience is not a particularly popular position in contemporary philosophy of mind. Thompson, however, thinks such a strategy is necessary if we are to give voice to the deep phenomenology of waking, dreaming, and dreamless consciousness. Contemplative traditions are host to highly detailed and complex accounts of the mind, and taking stock of the full range of conscious experience that such traditions bear witness to can lead to more effective ways of conceptualizing (in the hope of narrowing) the explanatory gap between science and experience—ways that Thompson regards as in principle capable of avoiding the pitfalls of either neurophysicalism (or what he terms "neuro-nihilism") or subjective idealism.

The commentaries showcase the merits and challenges of such a project, and provide both criticism and valuable suggestions for moving the discussion forward. Dunne draws attention to hermeneutical practices that form an integral part of Buddhist thinking about consciousness and cognition, and to the problematic issue (at least from a doctrinal standpoint) of pressing exegetically expedient statements in the service of advancing ultimate views. If Thompson rests his account of "the self as a process" on texts that purport to describe how a sense of self emerge from the five aggregates (e.g., via performative 'I-making' [*ahaṃkāra*] processes), then he must contend with scholastic positions in which such conventional accounts of agency and subjectivity are ultimately abandoned. Flanagan praises the book's methodological pluralism and radical interdisciplinarity, but also notes the many obstacles that such approaches often face: the reflective equilibrium Thompson seeks comes at the cost of comparing scientific and non-scientific sources and cultures; furthermore, the ontological agnosticism that his phenomenological stance entails has to contend with the fact that evidence from the evolutionary and mind sciences seems to favor physicalism.

Garfield, much like Dunne, raises both exegetical and conceptual questions about Thompson's reading of a key Buddhist thinker such as Candrakīrti as supporting the account of the self and consciousness he thus advances. Garfield marshals textual evidence that seems to yield a different interpretive stance, one that makes Candrakīrti seem like a rather unlikely ally for Thompson. According to Garfield, not only does Candrakīrti's Madhyamaka position preclude support for the notion of a real conventional self (specifically, one conceived as a process that is enacted and experienced), but, unlike Thompson, Candrakīrti is also an avowed anti-reflexivist.

Finally, Windt invites clarification of two important methodological assumptions at the heart of Thompson's project: first, the justification for making personal expe-

rience an integral part of philosophical argument, and second, the postulation of dream states as a distinctive class of phenomena not captured by the categories of either perception or hallucination (but, according to Thompson, rather more akin to imagination, mind wandering, and creative thought). She notes that personal dream experiences (including experiences associated with the practice of so-called *yoga nidra* or “dream yoga”)—the sort of source Thompson avails himself of in charting the phenomenology of dream states—can be prone to various kinds of implicit bias. Furthermore, she claims that dream experiences lack the sort of conceptual relationship that obtains between perceptual states and objects of perception (or between imagery and belief), and that, as *seeming* perceptions, they do resemble hallucinations enough to warrant treating them as such.

The important questions raised by the commentaries and Thompson’s reply demonstrate the richness and complexity of the issues under consideration, and the new perspectives that come to light when we establish a meaningful and productive dialogue between different philosophical traditions and cultures. It is to be expected that, as we look to the future of philosophy in the twenty-first century, we will continue to see many more innovative ways of pursuing this cosmopolitan dialogue.

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