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Philosophy East and West, Volume 66, Number 3, July 2016, pp. 952-958 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: 10.1353/pew.2016.0074

Philosophy East and West



A Quarterly of
Comparative Philosophy
Volume 66 - Number 3

University of Hawai'i Press

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Does Yoga Induce Metaphysical Hallucinations? Interdisciplinarity at the Edge: Comments on Evan Thompson's *Waking, Dreaming, Being*



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Waking, Dreaming, Being is an unusual book in many ways. I mention two. First, in some ways it is a memoir. Few philosophers started as a child doing the sort of philosophy that they did as a grown-up. Evan did. Evan grew up in the intellectually fertile world of the Lindisfarne Association, the collaborative of scientists, artists, ecologists, and contemplatives founded by his father, William Irwin Thompson, a polymath, whom I had the pleasure of meeting in 2004 at the Crestone Zen Monastery in Colorado.

Evan's dad taught him Raja Yoga as a boy—when he was seven!—and read him Upanishadic children's stories. Lindisfarne was the antithesis of a C. P. Snow-style *Two Cultures* environment where the sciences and humanities, is and ought, and traditional and edgy thought are separated in silos.

Besides his father, Evan has had important relations with other "strong poets." Francisco Varela, the great autopoietic biologist and neuroscientist, was his decade-ish-older soul mate. Bob Thurman, the bombastic Buddhist, was his mentor at Amherst. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama has his ear and vice versa, and when the story of "contemplative neuroscience" is told, whether it succeeds or fails, the Dalai Lama, Varela, Richie Davidson, and Evan will be viewed as its four horsemen. Finally, when I first met Evan in 1990, he was on a post-doc working with Dan Dennett at Tufts. My amateurish reading of influence (partially based on whom he mentions least) is that Dennett's views, Dennett's whole way of thinking, are the least congenial to Evan's thought as I have seen it develop over the years (especially in works like the *Embodied Mind*, coauthored with Cisco Varela and Eleanor Rosch, and the monumental *Mind and Life*). Although Evan never says this, Dennett is, I suspect, too scientific and too uncomfortable with the attitude of "not knowing," which Evan is very comfortable with, to have a place in Evan's pantheon. But I am speculating here.

But the first point is simply that this book is a philosophical memoir of a philosopher who, at a very young age, started thinking about the problems that absorb the mature man today. I cannot think of another philosopher like this. Maybe Athenian philosophy was like this. J. S. Mill learned Greek and Latin early, but not Indian philosophy! (Gosh, Evan even met his life partner Rebecca Todd when he was a boy!) Even Galen Strawson, Peter's son, did not start studying philosophy until he was 21. I started younger than Galen when my father gave me Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* to settle some theological doubts, but I was nowhere near as young as Evan. In any case, this book is, or can be read as, a memoir of a rare kind of life, a lifelong phi-

osopher's life, where lifelong does not mean from one's twenties to one's death, of which there are many examples.

Many people who will not read this book would not admire the "raised by hippies" feel of it. New Age types might like it too much. Analytic philosophers might well say that the memorial qualities are interesting and make for honest admission of early socialization or brainwashing, which, depending on one's perspective, Evan may or may not have adequately examined critically.

The second point is that the book is methodologically pluralistic, radically interdisciplinary. It is a methodological tour de force, but only if you approve of a genuinely interdisciplinary inquiry. I do. But many don't and won't. In defense of radical interdisciplinarity is the fact that the nature of the self, consciousness, persons, and good lives are human problems, not the problems of only one discipline, locked off in one discipline's proprietary silo. Some reflective people might agree with this, but nonetheless say that fairly strict divisions of labor and piecemeal approaches are warranted, because although these topics are not ultimately in the domain of any one discipline, individuals or groups of individuals are not equipped to see all sides at once. When we try to see all sides at once we get loose and sloppy. Things work best when we all abide the intellectual division of labor. When at the end of inquiry, or periodically along the way, we under-laborers chime in on our own little pieces of these puzzles, Google can do the synthesis, separate the wheat from the chaff, and reveal the grand theory or early versions of it.

Like Evan I have long defended what I call "the natural method" (1992) for the study of consciousness and self, where one blends findings from phenomenology, neuroscience, and psychology; and in the case of my own work on dreams I recommend adding to the mix great anthropological, religious, and hermeneutical views and practices on what dreams reveal, what they mean, if anything. One question I have always faced in my own attempts to defend a multiple-source approach, even from my most sympathetic readers, is they want to know what, when push comes to shove, is *trump*. For example, when the phenomenology conflicts with the neuroscience or psychology, which wins? My usual response is to say that there are no general trump rules, but sometimes reasons add up for one to think that one data source is mistaken in some way, at particular times. For example, even if the phenomenology tends toward an immaterialist or ontologically agnostic view on the physical nature of feelings, emotions, moods, and thoughts, the overall evidence in light of Darwin and the mind sciences favors physicalism, the view that each and every mental state is one or another bodily state. But, like Evan, I do not think the relation is reductive or that the phenomenal texture of these mental events is accessible using only third-person methods. I call this view "subjective realism." The details of that view are not the topic today, but are available, for the curious, in *Consciousness Reconsidered* (1992), *Dreaming Souls* (2000), and *The Problem of the Soul* (2002).

On method, Evan might be vulnerable to a new and special kind of criticism from the opponents of multidisciplinary methods. This has to do with the fact that the sort of reflective equilibrium he seeks includes cross-cultural sources from completely non-scientific cultures of three thousand years ago. I am 100 percent with

Evan on the worth of trying this—indeed, I have dedicated recent years wholeheartedly to promoting the resources of cross-cultural philosophy—but rest assured we face a battle here defending attention to the wisdom of the ages from a generation of philosophers and mind scientists who are victims of a poisonous neuro-enthusiasm, as well as the view that most of the interesting information about persons was last week, and thanks to fMRI.

So I mark both the unusual memorial quality of this work and its unusual methodological quality. I invite Evan to say anything to you, this audience, that he thinks might be helpful about either. One way to make the invitation more provocative is to wonder aloud whether *Waking, Dreaming, Being* embodies a pluralistic, open, not-knowing spirit, as well as a love for Indic sources because these are, as it were, the best resources for approaching these problems or because they are identity constitutive, almost constitutional for its author.

For the rest, I invite Evan to think with me about two specific topics. First, there is whether we should be agnostic and accept a “not knowing” or “staying with the open question” attitude about physicalism, or whether, as I mostly think, it is an inference to the best explanation that physicalism is true about self, consciousness, persons. This issue comes up most centrally in chapter 3, “Being, What Is Pure Awareness?,” where we learn a great deal about Evan’s recent thinking about the Fourteenth Dalai Lama’s ambivalent views on the brain basis of human consciousness. It comes up again at the end of the book, in chapter 9, “Dying, What Happens When We Die?,” where we learn a lot about Buddhist death-and-dying meditation and also that Evan recommends a view of Stephen Bachelor’s about survival or rebirth. Bachelor writes that “It may seem that there are two options: either to believe in rebirth or not: But there is a third alternative: to acknowledge, in all honesty, *I do not know*” (p. 290).

The second invitation relates to a question that I know Evan has thought hard about, but says little about, and I wish he would say more about: whether we can make sense of enlightenment and what it consists in. Throughout the book in the many discussions of various meditation practices, including dream yoga and dying meditation—but actually it is a general matter about most types of meditation (and it matters a lot for the prospects of contemplative science as science)—this question arises:

Is meditation (I know the question is not fine grained enough) designed to help us see the truth, the way things really are, but in ways we don’t normally don’t or can’t see because of ego, or is it designed to produce hallucinations (or imaginings) that might produce good effects, personal or social?

First, physicalism, and then, second, meditative veridicality.

In chapter 3 Evan addresses this question directly by revisiting discussions he has had with the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan Buddhists who are, let’s say, ambivalent about the answer to the question of whether consciousness, or every kind of consciousness—pure awareness may be a special case, for example—is contingent on the brain. Here Evan rehearses very politely the fact that how phenomenal expe-

rience seems is not evidence for how it is, as we say, realized physically, indeed whether it is or isn't realized physically, and if so how and where. He acknowledges that there is "no compelling evidence . . . for consciousness not being contingent on the brain or living body" (p. 96). And, footnoting me, he says:

At this point, some neuroscientists and philosophers will want to argue that brain science shows or at least strongly suggests than consciousness is nothing other than a brain process. According to this "neurophysicalist" view, neuroscience provides overwhelming evidence that every conscious experience is identical to some pattern of brain activity. (p. 101)

I wouldn't quite put things this way; rather I'd say that taken together all the sciences point toward the view that conscious mental states supervene narrowly on brains, and widely on states of embodied persons in the world. The physicalism is weak, because it is token physicalism not type physicalism. There is no possibility of reducing talk of conscious mental states to brain states, even though each and every conscious mental state is physical. It is put forward as an inference to the best explanation, given all that we know, or take ourselves to know.

Evan says he is not an emergentist, nor is he a panpsychist, epiphenomenalist, or mysterian on consciousness. Fine. I personally think everyone should be a diachronic emergentist on both life and consciousness. Once upon a time there was no life; then it evolved. Once upon a time there was life without consciousness; then it evolved, sprung up all over the place. I also think everyone should be a token physicalist about the synchronic identity of conscious states with bodily states. The evidence points in that direction, and almost none of the evidence supports any variety of dualism.

At the start of the book, Evan lines up with his friends the Dalai Lama, Matthieu Ricard, and Cisco Varela in thinking that we should be open to the possibility that there is at least one kind of consciousness that is "independent of the brain" (p. xxiv). This is "pure or luminous awareness." We should leave the question open.

Pure awareness or luminous awareness appears again in chapter 3 as the best candidate for a type of consciousness that is not contingent on the brain. And something like it appears again in the second-to-last chapter on dying where, in the case of questions of survival, "of what happened to consciousness at death" (p. 317), Evan recommends staying with the open question.

My own view here is something like this: questions about ontology, such as physicalism or not, and if so what kind, are to be worked out among specialists. There are issues of conversational decorum and kindness that ought to keep such specialists from announcing to people whom they meet on the street that you are 100 percent animal, and that your fate is that of other animals. In all likelihood consciousness is a psycho-biological phenomenon, and it almost certainly dissolves when you die. How long is your consciousness gone for? All eternity!

But it seems epistemically weird to act as if certain questions that are not really open—such as whether some kinds of consciousness have no physical basis or whether we survive—are open, when the main reason to do so is a way of showing

respect for systems of belief that are admittedly enchanting and enchanted, but developed long ago, when we knew less, and so on.

My last comment, really a question, is an invitation for Evan to say more about dream yoga and death-and-dying yoga and meditation in the context of the following sort of worry: Yoga and meditation are put forward throughout the book as multi-purpose, sometimes as vehicles of high resolution phenomenology—and thus as a data source for contemplative neuroscience, and perhaps for self-knowing. Other times, as in some examples of dream yoga, they are offered as techniques that might be just, as the kids say, really cool or fun, or, what is very different, as ways of learning such truths as impermanence, no-self, and so on. Other times, as in some dying yoga, they could be viewed as inducing hallucinations that have good effects. These multiple uses, some phenomenological, some as vehicles for ethical or epistemic self-cultivation, and some like tripping on acid, will have to be carefully distinguished if contemplative neuroscience is to become respectable.

I can bring out one kind of concern this way: In a *New Yorker* article (February 9, 2015) Michael Pollan reports on new—actually renewed—research on hallucinogens by top medical centers. Psilocybin, the key ingredient in magic mushrooms, is now being given to patients with terminal illnesses, and the results so far reveal that the well-controlled day-long trips are normally pleasant, interesting, and enjoyable—not at all like the bad trips of the days of yore, with unpleasant flashbacks. Unlike REM dreams, the trips are well remembered, and thus they are subsequently available for re-visitation and fine-grained analysis. Most importantly, as far as the patients go, the trips reduce fear and anxiety about dying, and produce a kind of acceptance, even contentment, about their impending death. Remarkably, even for individuals at death's door, the psilocybin experience is judged as in the very top group of existentially meaningful experiences in their lives.

A common feature of the phenomenology is described in terms of “completeness,” where this involves “feelings of unity, sacredness, ineffability, peace, and joy,” as well as the impression of having transcended space and time and the “noetic sense” that the experience has disclosed some objective truth about reality. A complete mystical experience is one that exhibits all six characteristics.

The so called “astronaut effect” of seeing the world from above but as a small part, feelings of awe, *ego dissolution*, *oneness*, and *expansive love* are other ways that the experiences are commonly described. (Interestingly, around the same time, Oliver Sacks, who passed a few months later, wrote a moving op-ed piece in the *New York Times* about receiving the news that he was terminally ill. He wrote: “over the last few days, I have been able to see my life as from a great altitude, as a sort of landscape, and with a deepening sense of the connection of all its parts.”¹) Again, one really interesting feature of these trips is that they are experienced as revelatory of the way things really are, not as hallucinatory.

But Pollan asks:

How are we to judge the veracity of the insights gleaned during a psychedelic tour? It's one thing to conclude that love is all that matters, but quite another to come away from a

therapy convinced that “there is another reality awaiting us after death, as one volunteer put it, or that there is more to the universe—and consciousness—than a purely materialistic view of the world would have us believe. Is psychedelic therapy simply foisting a comforting delusion on the sick and dying?

Pollan goes on to discuss William James’s famous view that we can judge mystical experiences not by their objective truth-value but by their fruits, by whether they have positive effects, results. To a certain extent I think this is right. But there are reasons to be extremely clear about such matters.

So here is the second invitation to Evan: In reporting on dreams, guiding dreams, imagining my own dying, or imagining what it is like to be dead, there are deep questions about the general epistemic, hermeneutic, and therapeutic theories supporting phenomenological reports, guidance, and therapeutic goals if any. The main worry can be expressed this way: Why think that these techniques are good for helping us accurately see the way things are, as opposed to inducing us to see things in certain false but good-producing ways?

In the chapters on dreams and dying, Evan reminds us periodically that many Indic traditions, Buddhism especially, are concerned with seeing things as they really are and alleviating suffering. The metaphysics of impermanence, no-self, dependent origination, and their suite are in the service of ending suffering—often inside a karmic background theory, a karmic soteriology that embeds a theory of consciousness.

But one question (Evan admits worrying about it) is how we are to understand these different strands and keep them sorted out. It matters for the promises of blending phenomenology with findings from the other human sciences that contemplative neuroscience promises. Deciding to report, interpret, or guide my dreams for certain ends in dream yoga, or to imagine my own dying, even my own death, are worthy, respectable things to do. But when, where, and how they provide grist for the mill of an objective phenomenology, or sources for cognitive science or metaphysics, will require great caution. I am a great lover of the wisdom traditions of the past. But I raise this caution: many advocates of contemplative science, not Evan, are relatively uncritical enthusiasts for various kinds of ancient wisdom. And, lacking scientific training, they will not be careful about these matters. So Evan, you’d better be!

Late in his life, when he was already in his nineties, Bertrand Russell wrote this about overcoming the fear of death:

The best way to overcome it . . . is to make your interests gradually wider and more impersonal, until bit by bit the walls of the ego recede, and your life becomes increasingly merged in the universal life. An individual human existence should be like a river: small at first, narrowly contained within its banks, and rushing passionately past rocks and over waterfalls. Gradually the river grows wider, the banks recede, the waters flow more quietly, and in the end, without any visible break, they become merged in the sea, and painlessly lose their individual being.

This seems like good advice. But note that Russell is speaking about adopting a certain attitude that helps one accept that death in all likelihood is the end of me for all

eternity. He may also be speaking about what it feels or seems like to adopt that attitude and thus in a certain sense is a careful phenomenologist. Is he saying anything about the way consciousness normally is or the way the world is, the way the metaphysical facts line up? I don't think so.

Note

1 – See http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/19/opinion/oliver-sacks-on-learning-he-has-terminal-cancer.html?_r=0.

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