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Examining the nature of mind

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A review of Understanding Consciousness by Max Velmans (Routledge, 2000).

Max Velmans is Reader in Psychology at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Over the last decade or so he has contributed an impressive list of publications in the area of consciousness studies. He is particularly well qualified to undertake the difficult task of attempting to explain the mysteries of consciousness in the light of modern philosophical and psychological knowledge and debate.

Much of our interest in transpersonal psychology is concerned with the topic of consciousness, for example the study of meditation experience and other altered states. Furthermore, a very common assumption within our discipline is that transpersonal development involves a fundamental transformation in human consciousness. For this reason, transpersonal psychologists do well to take an interest in the kind of fundamental issues that Velmans addresses in his book. These concern the nature and function of consciousness, the relationship between conscious and unconscious processes, the mind-body problem, epistemological questions of how consciousness can and should be investigated, and the contribution that paradigms such as cognitive psychology and neuroscience can make to our overall understanding of mind and consciousness. Velmans grapples effectively with all these issues and he does so in an engaging and exceptionally lucid style. If this is a difficult book in places it is because the subject matter itself is complex and needs to be taken slowly and carefully. Generally, however, Velmans is to be congratulated on his success in clarifying and demystifying this often mind-numbing subject.

Having said all that, there is very little, if any, *transpersonal* psychology in this book. For example, Velmans deliberately focuses his attention on normal

states of consciousness, with barely a mention of meditation or altered states. This is not a criticism of the book, but simply a warning to those who may read it expecting something rather different. The transpersonal is not directly on Velman's menu, although he raises a number of related questions and issues, to which I shall return later.

In many ways this reflects the clear division that seems to have become established in psychology between the transpersonal approach and that of consciousness studies, as exemplified by the fact that the BPS has two distinct academic sections in these areas. Whether or not we approve of this division, it seems to have become a de facto reality that we must accept for the time being. This does not mean, however, that these two areas do not share much common ground, nor that each area cannot learn from the other. In this way, I approached this book from the perspective of a transpersonal psychologist who is not a specialist in consciousness studies, but who wishes to further his knowledge of this 'other paradigm' in a way that may hopefully extend and enrich his general understanding of consciousness. I was not disappointed.

Understanding Consciousness is a book of three parts. Part 1, "Mind-body theories and their problems" looks at some of the fundamental philosophical conundrums posed by consciousness, which are considered in the light of the competing world views of dualism and materialist reductionism. Part 2, "A new analysis: How to marry science with experience", aims to rethink these historical debates by taking a "common sense" phenomenological perspective which is then considered in relationship to current research and theory in information processing and neuroscience. Part 3, "A new synthesis: reflexive monism" presents Velmans' own philosophical position, in which the psychophysical system of the universe is viewed as one fundamental reality (ontological monism) which can be viewed from either a first-person or a third-person perspective (epistemological dualism). According to Velmans, this enables us to understand more clearly what consciousness is and what it does. Let us examine some of this in more detail.

Velmans begins by identifying the fundamental questions that we need to answer in order to understand consciousness. These are:

1. What *is* consciousness?
2. What are the *causal relationships* between consciousness and matter (brain)?
3. What is the *function* of consciousness?
4. What *forms of matter* are associated with consciousness?
5. What are the appropriate ways to *examine* consciousness?

In my view Velmans succeeds in defining consciousness as well as anyone - which is to say not very well at all. Thus "a person, or other entity, is conscious if they experience *something*" (p. 6), a definition that seems to me profoundly circular but serves at least to make his fundamental point that consciousness must have phenomenal content - i.e., it must be *of* something. Interestingly, he deliberately ignores, although does not entirely dismiss, the possibility of "pure" or contentless consciousness, as recognised in various meditation systems. Whether or not this omission fundamentally undermines the foundations of his later philosophical and psychological edifice is an interesting question that deserves to be debated by those better qualified than myself.

Velmans next examines the ancient and modern history of *dualism*, or the belief that mind and body are two separate substances or realities, together with the problems introduced by a dualistic perspective (e.g., if mind and body are completely separate ontological realities, how can they possibly interact?). From this, Velmans moves on to a similar examination of the competing views of *monism*, or the belief that there is only one fundamental ontological reality, whether this be mind (idealism), matter (physical reductionism) or some other reality of which mind and matter are different aspects (e.g., dual-aspect theory). The substance theories of classical dualism and monism are also contrasted with approaches to mind or consciousness that view these as types of process or *activity*. These include behaviourism, functionalism, A.I. and cognitive psychology.

This is all fairly standard stuff in the philosophy of mind and history of psychology, but it is covered by Velmans in a scholarly, clearly presented and concise way that will be of use to many approaching these areas for the first time. His most important conclusion is that neither materialist reductionism nor process approaches can possibly be made to work as accounts of *consciousness*. This is because they must fail to explain or recognise the essential feature of conscious experience, which is that it has properties (or *qualia*) that can only be understood subjectively, from a first-person perspective. In this way it is simply *impossible* for any such third-person physicalist or process account to explain or describe subjective *experiences* such as the sensations of sight, sound, taste, smell or taste.

While dismissing both physical reductionism and process approaches, Velmans wishes to embrace neither classical dualism nor idealism. Instead he proposes (in Part 2) his own *reflexive model*, which he argues is simply a "common-sense" phenomenological view of consciousness. This reflexive model is basically the proposition that there is no distinction between the world we experience and our experience of the world (hence classical dualism is wrong). For example, when we see a cat, we see the cat *out there* in space. The externally perceived cat does not produce a separate experience of the cat "in our mind". There is just the cat, as perceived, out there. Similarly, a pain in our finger is just that - a pain in our finger, not in our mind. The way this works, according to Velmans, is that perception involves a *projected construction* (or kind of virtual reality) of the ordinary three-dimensional world of our experience. Descartes was therefore wrong when he postulated that the mental world has no spatial extension, thereby distinguishing it from the physical world. According to Velmans, Descartes was led into this error by choosing *thinking* as the prototypical mental activity whereas he should have chosen *perception*. In my view, Velmans' analysis to this point is both convincing and essentially correct. We live, as Aurobindo and other Eastern philosophers have argued, in a world of maya, a closed phenomenal illusory world of our own construction.

Although the phenomenal world is essentially an illusion, Velmans does not advocate a strictly idealistic position, such as that adopted by Bishop Berkeley. Rather, he argues for an essentially Kantian distinction between the phenomenal world we experience and the "thing itself". In other words, Velmans believes that there *is* a real world (e.g., the world studied by physics) but that this cannot be directly experienced (even by physicists). Instead we can only know this underlying reality via our *phenomenal* (or theoretical) *representations* of it. However, this does not mean that *any* representation is as good as any other because some perceptions are clearly more functional or adaptive than others. Thus (my example) whatever the entity or ultimate reality is that I experience as a car speeding towards me as I cross the road, it is more functional to experience it as a car than as a soft blue balloon. In this respect, Velmans' reflexive model is very close indeed to the philosophical assumptions of George Kelly's personal construct psychology, although this is not referred to in the book. Velmans develops the case for his reflexive model at some length (some might find it rather laboured and repetitive) but he provides along the way a wealth of useful and often fascinating examples from a variety of sources to support his thesis.

In arguing for an ontological distinction between (1) entities or events in themselves and (2) mind or consciousness, Velmans seems to me to be advocating a form of dualism, although not of the classical Cartesian variety. However he characterises his own philosophical position as one of *reflexive monism* rather than of dualism. In preparing the way for this final synthesis, Velmans changes his tack from ontology to epistemology. Since we cannot know reality itself, but only the phenomenal world of experience (which *includes* what we ordinarily take to be the physical world) we should focus on how we achieve knowledge of this phenomenal world. This, he argues, can occur in two distinct ways. Most fundamentally, there is the direct inner knowledge of our own subjective experience - our first-person perspective. Then there is the knowledge we can gain from investigating another person's mental processes from an external, third-person perspective. A full science of mind or consciousness, Velmans argues, requires both first-person and third-person epistemologies and methodologies. Moreover, in both approaches,

consciousness is central to the whole enterprise. Despite the efforts of some scientists to deny that consciousness exists at all, the truth is that ALL science is totally dependent on our capacity for consciousness (e.g., physicists must be able to *see* the readings on their recording instruments).

By adopting both first-person and third-person methodologies, it becomes possible to know and investigate a phenomenon such as colour perception (or near-death experiences for that matter) by asking a subject to report on her experiences and also by simultaneously investigating the *correlated* neural mechanisms or information processing systems. This is an important point that echoes the interior-exterior distinction in Ken Wilber's recent quadrant model. It has profound implications for all areas of psychology, not least our own area of transpersonal psychology, which has perhaps tended to overemphasise interior, first-person perspectives and methodologies.

Velmans concludes that his own approach is one of *ontological monism* but *epistemological dualism*. By this he means that there is only one mind-brain or psychophysical reality which can become known or represented from either the inside (if the underlying mind-brain processes are available to consciousness) or the outside (if the processes are unconscious, or physical). This is reasonable enough, but Velmans also seeks to extend this notion of ontological monism beyond the individual organism by arguing that fundamentally there is only one Universe, which contains conscious beings capable of forming different views of itself. This, it seems to me, is an interesting and subtle but rather different point and one which actually undermines his earlier argument that consciousness must be considered ontologically distinct from the "thing itself". In which case, we are back to square one concerning the question of what consciousness *is*. Velmans devotes a late chapter to this very question but does not, in my opinion, provide a clear or convincing answer.

The final chapters of *Understanding Consciousness* consider the question of what consciousness *does*. Here Velmans discusses the implications of the paradoxical evidence from studies in brain science and information

processing suggesting that consciousness does not seem to be *necessary* for any of our psychological processes. These studies indicate that processes that we ordinarily understand to *depend on* consciousness, such as perceptual discrimination, thinking, planning, speaking and voluntary action are all carried out for us, behind the scenes as it were, and generally *before* the arising of any conscious awareness. Also many other psychological processes, of course, never become conscious at all. From this third-person perspective it seems that we could all function just the same without the addition of consciousness. If this is the case, it raises the question of why does consciousness exist at all and what is its purpose? Velmans considers various possible answers to this fundamental and intriguing question and tentatively puts forward his own preferred response, chosen because it appears to offer the most elegant solution. Consciousness, he argues, is probably a basic property of the Universe. As such it did not suddenly emerge at some point in the evolutionary process, although undoubtedly evolution has contributed to the emergence of different *forms* of consciousness (e.g., bee consciousness is different from human consciousness). It is through evolution and our own participation in this process that the Universe comes to know itself: In this way: "Through the evolution of matter, consciousness is given *form*. And through consciousness, the material universe is *real-ised."* (p. 281*).*

In my view, this is both a profound and poetic vision and one that is consistent, if not identical, with the transpersonal philosophies of, among others, Aurobindo, Teilhard de Chardin and Wilber. For this reason I am encouraged that there may indeed come the day when the disciplines of consciousness studies and transpersonal psychology may recognise a common ground from which both may find nourishment and a way forward. Consciousness studies, and Velmans' book, offer much of value to transpersonal psychologists. If I should be so bold as to suggest what transpersonal psychology might offer in return, it would be the importance of considering consciousness (and the monist Universe of which Velmans speaks) to include a *spiritual* dimension. For Velmans, the Universe, the "thing itself" is some kind of *psychophysical* reality in which there is seemingly no place for God or Spirit. Velmans may be right, but the question is still open

and it deserves to be considered and debated rather than simply ignored. In this respect Aurobindo, Teilhard and Wilber have much to contribute to this much-needed debate.

In conclusion, *Understanding Consciousness* is a well-written, scholarly, thorough, challenging but not overly difficult book. It will be of particular value to final-year undergraduate and postgraduate students taking courses in consciousness studies, cognitive psychology and transpersonal psychology, as well as to anyone wishing to extend their knowledge and understanding of philosophical and psychological approaches to the nature of mind and consciousness.

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