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*Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in  
Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy*

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# A Review of *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy*

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*Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy.*  
By Evan Thompson. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, 496 pages, ISBN  
9780231136952 (paperback), \$22.95 / £17.99.

Evan Thompson's *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy* offers a compelling synthesis of ideas brought forth through one of the great cross-cultural confluences of our time, i.e. the comparative and collaborative interaction between the experiential insights of contemplative traditions in Eastern philosophy and the empirical investigations of the mind through contemporary science, thus paving the way for what Thompson describes as "a new and unprecedented kind of self-knowledge—a way of knowing ourselves that unites cognitive science and the contemplative view of the mind from within" (xix). Thompson is a philosopher who is exceptionally well-situated to facilitate such a unification through his own life history and professional background. A major contributor to contemporary philosophy of mind through his influential work on embodiment, perception,

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consciousness, and other related topics, Thompson has been at the forefront of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study of the mind for decades. He was a research partner with the late Chilean neuroscientist Francisco Varela, noted for his pioneering work in neurophenomenology, and, relatedly, has contributed to the Mind and Life Institute's efforts to develop the field of contemplative neuroscience through interactive dialogue between Buddhists (especially Tibetan Buddhists, via the Dalai Lama) and scientists. In this latest synthesis of his work, Thompson develops a comprehensive perspective on the nature of consciousness and selfhood that unifies a rich array of investigation and experience across waking life, meditation, various states of dreaming, and the inevitable human confrontation with death.

The book is written such that each chapter can be read independently, with the penultimate chapter on death having been previously published as a stand-alone short e-book. While this results in some repetition of ideas across different chapters, the book flows quite well overall. Thompson's prose is remarkably clear and engaging throughout, conjoining accessible exposition and nuanced comparative analysis with careful philosophical theory-building that culminates in an insightful framework for understanding the self in terms of the enactive processes of embodied conscious experience. In this review I will outline the main topics Thompson covers in his book and further analyze the place of embodiment in his enactive account of selfhood.

Thompson begins his exploration of consciousness with the Upanishads, which he describes as "humanity's first truly philosophical work" and "oldest recorded map of consciousness" (18-19). In contrast to the common contemporary view of consciousness as an essentially waking phenomenon that is lost in states of dreamless sleep, Thompson draws upon the Upanishads to develop a multi-tiered framework for understanding consciousness across waking life, dream states, dreamless sleep, and an underlying non-dual state of blissful awareness that, according to the Upanishads, comprises the ultimate fabric of reality. Ra-

ther than embracing the Upanishadic conception of consciousness as the primary foundation of reality, however, Thompson follows the shift in Buddhism toward conceiving of consciousness as dependently arising through the changing conditions of “name” (*nāma*) and “form” (*rūpa*). He then proceeds to engage various insights and observations across multiple domains of Buddhist philosophy and meditation (e.g., the Abhidharma, Theravada Vipassana meditation, the Yogācāra school, and Tibetan Buddhism), in conjunction with the neurophenomenological search for the neural correlates of consciousness through both first-person (e.g. meditation) and third-person (e.g., brain-scanning technology) methods, weaving together an understanding of our existence as conscious beings that neither reduces consciousness to the physical nor decouples consciousness from our embodied presence in the world. Instead, Thompson conceives of consciousness and embodiment as mutually inter-dependent elements that prop each other up, ontologically speaking, while granting epistemological primacy to phenomenological experience and the contributions it can make to ongoing contemporary investigation into the conscious mind.

After establishing this neurophenomenological framework for contemplative science in the first three chapters, Thompson puts it to work throughout the central chapters of the book to develop an in-depth and multiperspectival exploration of alternative states of consciousness and their correlates in the brain, ranging across the hypnogogic state between wakefulness and sleep, ordinary dream states, lucid dreams, dreamless sleep, so-called “out-of-body” experiences, near-death experiences, and the process of death itself. Throughout his discussion of these states, Thompson combines detailed experiential observations from contemplative traditions and practices with the ongoing findings and developments of cognitive neuroscience. Highlights of Thompson’s cross-disciplinary explorations of consciousness include the application of dream yoga techniques to facilitate scientific study of the brain across different phases of sleep, the proposal that consciousness persists not only across different kinds of dream states but also through dreamless

sleep, nuanced analysis regarding whether or not there can be states of consciousness without corresponding activity in the brain, and a steadfast confrontation with the ultimate question of what happens with our consciousness when we die.

After Thompson's exploration of consciousness comes to a close with commentary on the limits of experience in the face of death, the final chapter of the book returns to the central topic of the nature of the self in the world. Through careful theoretical analysis, Thompson develops an enactive account of selfhood, the central thesis of which is that the self is not a thing but rather a process. Just as a dance is brought about through the act of dancing, and is not a substantive independent thing apart from the activity of dancing itself, Thompson conceives of the self as an enactive process of "I-making" that is constructed through the self-organizing activities that we embody across the biological, psychological, and social facets of our existence as beings in the world.

In developing this account of selfhood, Thompson follows the "middle way" of Nāgārjuna and rejects both the nihilistic view of the self as an illusion and the reification of the self as a substantive entity. Here he places the Yogācāra theorists of Buddhist philosophy in the same boat as recent "neuro-nihilists" like the German philosopher Thomas Metzinger, both sharing the claim that the self is a kind of illusion on the assumption that if the self exists, it must be an independent entity or substance that stands apart from the "five aggregates" and/or the underlying substrate of the brain. In Thompson's assessment, both Yogācāra Buddhism and contemporary neuro-nihilism observe correctly that there is no independent entity that can be identified as a "self," but then mistakenly infer from this observation that the self is an illusion. In contrast, Thompson portrays the self as a real phenomenon, although not as a substantive entity but rather a dependently co-arisen process that emerges as a construction through its own self-designation. As with other topics covered in the book, Thompson brings together insights from

Eastern wisdom traditions and relevant scientific observations to develop and explain this enactive account of the self.

Although I find this enactive conception of the self more plausible than either regarding the self as an illusion or reifying the self as an independent entity, the tenuous, self-constructed nature of Thompson's conception of the self leads me to question the ontological foundations of his account. Despite his avowed embrace of embodiment, the irreducible primacy that he gives throughout the book to first-person phenomenology and its internal "I-making" activity in the construction of the self prohibits him from stepping "outside" the phenomenology of experience to ontologically ground the conscious self in physical reality. He acknowledges the neural correlates of various facets of consciousness and relates the self-making processes of selfhood to the life-forming processes of biology, but stops short of explicitly identifying the conscious self with these corresponding physical processes in the body and its relations to the surrounding environment. Despite his well-argued rejection of a dualist separation of mind from body, the ultimate relations between the conscious self and the embodied living person in the world remain somewhat unclear from within the constraints of Thompson's phenomenological foundations. Unlike those who directly accept a physicalist identification of the mind with the brain and/or embrace an externalist understanding of mental content and cognitive processing in the philosophy of mind, Thompson's enacted self comes across more like an internal construction of the mind than a fully embodied manifestation of a living being embedded in the physical world, the reality of which is not confined to its own self-enacted constructions but also extends to its physical basis in the body and its causal relations with the surrounding natural world through which it exists.

This lacuna regarding Thompson's treatment of embodiment should be regarded as a theoretical oversight rather than a fatal flaw, however. Overall, Thompson's theorizing holds up well and establishes a significant framework for bringing together both first-person and third-

person approaches to the study of the mind across cultures and disciplines. Given the breadth of topics, theories, perspectives, and practices that he covers in this work, one might question how effectively Thompson could synthesize the varieties of contemplative wisdom and scientific investigation he discusses; but, in fact, he is remarkably successful at weaving the relevant multifarious threads together into a cohesive and largely plausible understanding of consciousness and self. I enthusiastically recommend this book to anyone interested in the topics it covers, especially to those who, like me, are drawn to cross-cultural engagement and the value of integrating traditional wisdom with the ongoing pursuits of empirical investigation. Thompson's book is a valuable offering that not only synthesizes what we humans have come to understand about our own minds thus far, but also paves the way for new modes of investigation in the perennial human pursuit of self-knowledge.