

Experiential Location and Points of View

A Review of Max Velmans' *Understanding Consciousness*

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ABSTRACT: *Understanding Consciousness* offers both a useful introduction to problems of consciousness and an explanation and defense of Velmans' own view. Two distinctive aspects of the latter are full recognition of the spatial character of many of our experiences, and equal respect for first- and third-person points of view. These features underlie a neo-Kantian view of representation of objects, and lead Velmans to reject epiphenomenalism despite advancing arguments to show that, from a third-person point of view, consciousness makes no causal contribution to behavior. Difficulties attend several of Velmans' points, among them his way of rejecting of epiphenomenalism, and his use of the concept of representation. But some of his arguments contain ideas that are likely to prove important in the development of the study of consciousness.

Although *Understanding Consciousness* is nominally divided into three parts, it is more usefully regarded as falling into two divisions, one for beginners in consciousness studies, and one for those who are already aficionados. This review will focus on the latter division, corresponding mainly to chapters 6 through 9, and chapter 11. Let us, however, begin with the earlier material.

The first five chapters form a roughly chronologically ordered presentation of the problems of philosophy of mind, from Cartesian dualism to the views of Dennett and Searle. These chapters could profitably be assigned as a way of giving beginning graduate students in philosophy of mind an overview of major theories and major objections, and it would help them to understand how the field has arrived at its present state. The writing is clear and accessible, and would also be invaluable to nonphilosophers who seek to understand the perspective through which philosophers approach consciousness studies.

A key point in these early chapters is the tripartite distinction among identity ("ontological identity", in Velmans' phrasing), correlation, and causation. This distinction is already well understood by many thinkers, but Velmans (p. 36) has a very clear way of stating it. The distinction figures prominently in later discussions in which Velmans takes psychologists and others to task for moving from well grounded correlational claims to unjustified causal or identity claims.

The presentation of Velmans' own theory begins in Chapter 6. The key point of this chapter, and perhaps the most important contribution of the book, is a phenomenological one. The actual character of our experience is held to be three dimensional, for vision and audition, and bodily-locational for bodily sensations. Velmans argues that it is a misrepresentation of experience itself to say that experience is located in the brain, or in the head, or that visual experience is merely two dimensional. Our experience of, say, a cat, is experience of a *cat* -- not of a cat-percept. The experienced cat is not in the head, with its distal location merely added by an inference; instead, the experience itself has depth, and the cat is located in the experience right where we take the cat to be located in space. Similarly, a pain is not felt "in the head" and merely inferred to be caused by, say, a cut in one's finger; instead, the experience of pain is an experience of pain in the finger. In Velmans' view, "the physical world as perceived is *part* of the contents of consciousness. . . . [I]n terms of *phenomenology* no clear separation exists between what we normally think of as the "physical world", the "phenomenal world" and the "world as perceived". . . . [W]ith our eyes open, what we normally call the "physical world" just *is* what we experience. There is no *additional* experience of the world "in the mind or brain" (pp. 125 -126; emphases in original.) Velmans sometimes expresses this view in terms of "perceptual projection" of colors, sounds, and bodily sensations, and he also encapsulates the view by saying that experience is *representational*.

A cat as experienced is the physical cat of common sense, located "over there", for example on the sofa. But, of course, we do not experience all there is to a cat. We think of the cat as having insides that we do not see, and as being made of molecules or atoms which, again, are not in visual (or any other sensory) experience. These reflections naturally lead to the question of how the experienced cat is related to the cat as understood by physics. In answer, Velmans adopts (in Chapter 7) an explicit neo-Kantianism. Experience is one representation of the thing itself, and the cat as described by physics is another representation of the thing itself. "Like experienced/observed phenomena, theories may provide useful representations of what the world is like, but they are not the thing itself" (p. 163).

In Chapter 8, Velmans turns to the question of how a science of consciousness is possible. A key point here is that experimenters in psychological science are in the same position as subjects, with respect to observation of stimuli. That is, experimenters observe a stimulus, e.g., a light bulb, and record the publicly observable fact that such a stimulus is presented. The subject reports seeing the light bulb, and this is taken as a report of the subject's experience. These records play different roles (record of experimental setup *versus* experiential report); but both are experiences of the light bulb, and *as experiences* both are the same. Each is just as much about the (objective) world as the other. In Velmans' view, this symmetry of experimenters' and subjects' experiences is a key to understanding how "subjective" experience can be part of an intersubjectively shared science, and to understanding how consciousness can be investigated without first being reduced to (or identified with) a set of events describable from a strictly third-person point of view.

Besides the question of the relation between experienced cats and cats as described in physics, there are the questions (1) of the relation between experienced cats and events in the brain caused by the action of the cat (as described by physics) upon the sense organs and their associated neural structures; and (2) the relation between experiences and subsequent brain activities. The answer to the first question is implicit in what we have already seen: the brain events caused by impingements on our sense organs in turn cause the perceptual projection of the world as we experience it. This projection is an effect of, and therefore not identical with, the brain events that cause it.

The answer to the second question is that, from a third-person point of view, consciousness makes no causal contribution to our behavior or our thinking. This view is argued for in detail in Chapter 9 (which follows the line developed in Velmans, 1991). Many easily understood examples are introduced in order to support the key point, which is that consciousness arises too late to causally contribute to events that it is often supposed to have the function of bringing about. Evidence from psychological studies is adduced in support of the claim that consciousness takes about 200 ms to arise after an input has arrived at the cortical surface. By this time, a large amount of sophisticated information processing has already taken place, which shows that consciousness is not necessary for such processing. (The *correlation* of consciousness with such processing does not, of course, show causal contribution -- see above.) Consider, by way of example, what happens when we read the following sentence out loud, or to ourselves in silent soliloquy.

If we don't increase the dustmen's wages, they will refuse to take the refuse.

Presumably, readers pronounce the first occurrence of "refuse" differently from the second. But, given the above figure for time for consciousness to arise, and given the rate at which we normally read, the rather complex processing that produces the (correct) pronunciation of the first occurrence must have occurred before the phonemic representation of that pronunciation enters consciousness.

These observations naturally lead to the allegation that, according to Velmans' view, consciousness is epiphenomenal. Epiphenomenalism for consciousness is, indeed, the conclusion that should logically be drawn by those who accept Velmans' account of how matters stand in the third person point of view *and* who do not accept Velmans' further remarks. Velmans himself, however, propounds a "Causal Paradox". "Viewed from a first-person perspective, consciousness appears to be necessary for most forms of complex or novel processing. But viewed from a third-person perspective, consciousness does not appear to be necessary for any form of processing. I submit that it does not make sense to reject either perspective" (p. 219).

Chapter 9 further contributes to the understanding of the lack of causal role for consciousness in the third-person perspective by offering a distinction among three senses in which a process might be conscious. These senses are, roughly, (i) a process of which one is conscious; (ii) a process that is accompanied by consciousness (of its results); and (iii) a process to which consciousness causally contributes. There are many examples of the second kind, few examples of the first, and no examples of the third. But confusion of the second sense with the others, largely due to ignoring the distinction between association (i.e., correlation) and causation, is alleged to mislead thinkers into false affirmations of cases of the first and third kinds.

The first half of Chapter 11 ("What Consciousness Does") concerns itself with the shape of a science of the neural correlates of consciousness. It is in the second half, however, that key parts of Velmans' analysis are offered. The explanatory gap is claimed to be bridged by adopting an ontological monism together with an epistemological dualism. We have already encountered the epistemological dualism -- it is the dualism of the first-person and third-person perspectives. The thing known through these different perspectives is now labeled the "nature of mind" (p. 249). About this nature, Velmans conjectures that "mind can be thought of as a form of information processing" (p. 249). Minds "viewed from the outside" are brains; viewed from the first-person perspective, they take the form of conscious experiences. Electromagnetism is invoked as a (limited) analogy: electromagnetism takes the form of electricity under certain conditions, magnetism under others. Neither form is reducible to the other, but they are not independent forces that "interact" -- instead, they are dual aspects of the same fundamental form of energy (p. 250). This view is alleged to provide a resolution of the Causal Paradox (see above). The main move in this explanation appears to be that the "information encoded in your experiences and their neural correlates is identical. Consequently, first- and third-person accounts of the causal roles of such information need not conflict. They may simply be accounts of the same underlying process developing over time, viewed in two complementary ways" (p. 254).

As to what consciousness does, the answer, in the end, is that it makes events and processes subjectively real. Without consciousness, there would be only processing in a dark world.

With Chapter 11 we come to the end of the main development of Velmans' ideas. There is one further chapter of frankly speculative intent. This chapter also attempts a critique

of Chalmers' (1996) theory. Unfortunately, its representation of Chalmers' views is seriously incomplete in some respects and inaccurate in others; as a result, the critique flies very wide of its intended mark.

In this reviewer's opinion, *Understanding Consciousness* offers many insights, and both the phenomenological point of chapter 6 and the third-person causal irrelevance of consciousness to behavior argued for in chapter 9 are of special importance. Our ability to switch points of view upon the same experience (counting it as an observation of the world or as an observation of our experience of the world) is also salutary. There are, however, a number of limitations, some evident from the foregoing summary, some not. Among the most important of these limitations are the following. (1) Velmans states many points in terms of representation -- representing is supposed to be a key property of conscious experiences. But Velmans offers no theory of representation; thus it is often not clear what key statements using this term really come to. Velmans (p. 260) cites Tye (1995) as having defended a representational view, and Tye does offer a theory of representation; thus one might think that Velmans can render his analysis more complete simply by taking over Tye's account. But Tye's account explains representation by reference to tracking, and it does not seem that Velmans can say that conscious experiences track either things themselves, or things as represented in physical theories, or the nature of mind. Thus, the lack of a theory of representation in Velmans' book is a matter of serious moment, even for so much as understanding Velmans' view. (2) Speaking of the contents of normal phenomenal consciousness, Velmans says "these contents *define and fill* three-dimensional space as they are *none other* than the everyday world, or universe, as experienced" (p. 228; emphases in original). Without its last two words, this remark seems to be acutely in need of explication. With its last two words included, this pressure for explication seems somewhat reduced; however, with those words included, the remark is either nearly tautologous or radically unclear in its meaning. Unfortunately, many of Velmans' remarks, even some that are essential parts of key explanations, have this same character of being unhelpful, if read in one plausible way, and unclear in their import if they are not to be read in that way. (3) Although I have tried to present Velmans' resolution of the Causal Paradox in a sympathetic way, it does not seem clear that reference to the first-person perspective actually resolves any difficulties. Velmans remarks that "from the perspective of an external observer, it [the material world] appears to be causally closed" (p. 253). This formulation is consistent with Velmans' view that third-person and first-person perspectives deserve equal respect. Most thinkers, however, will view the causal closure of the material world as more than merely an appearance. According to our best theories, such causal closure is a fact; the material world not only appears to be, but is causally closed. If conscious events are not identical with some subset of the sufficient material causes of our behavior, then they *are not* causally contributory to it. Respect for a point of view in which they *appear* to be causally contributory will not explain how to save this appearance from being a mere, i.e., erroneous, appearance.

In sum: *Understanding Consciousness* has substantial problems that prevent it from fulfilling the promise of its title. (This is, surely, no surprise.) At the same time, it contains ideas with which students of consciousness must acquaint themselves, and that

seem likely to form a part of the most satisfying views of consciousness that are likely to be developed in the foreseeable future.

References

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