



Book Review

Max Velmans 'How can conscious experiences affect brains?', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vo. 9, No. 11, 2002. Imprint Academic, 2003, ISBN 0907845398.

Reviewed by Elizabeth McCardell

Who's in control? Who, in the words of Max Velmans (p. 20), 'chooses, has thoughts, generates images and so on?' Who, or what, is this thing called "consciousness"? As has become clear by virtue of extensive neurological and psychological research, there is a gap between conscious experience and the neurological processes themselves. Conscious experience, conscious selves, are 'generated by and represent aspects of our own preconscious minds. That is, we are *both* the pre-conscious generating processes *and* the conscious results.' We are both the experience of consciousness and the neurochemical and associated physical activities of our organism.

The question is, Is phenomenal consciousness (that is, the everyday experience of the external world, the body, and inner experiences such as thoughts, feelings, etc) nothing more than the physiology of the organism that gives rise to it? There is no doubt that having a good understanding of the operations of neural, endocrine, cortical, autonomic and immune systems is very useful, but does this knowledge adequately account for the uniqueness of subjective experience? Some would say it does, saying that if neural causes or correlates of consciousness in the brain were found, this would establish consciousness as a brain state, while

others realize that replacing a biomedical explanation for what remains mysterious is not ultimately useful, for what is the point of having something rather than being nothing? As Velmans point out that if consciousness were to be found as nothing more than a brain state, it must be ontologically identical to a brain state, yet it is not. Correlation and causation does not establish ontological identity. The situation still has two characteristics: an experience of being conscious and a psychophysiological account.

So, is consciousness something else; something non-material? If this is the case, then how can consciousness affect the physical realm? Would not the physical world remain untouched by this non-physical consciousness? Since one is not conscious of one's own brain/body processing, how can there be conscious control of such processing? How does, for instance, biofeedback operate? The two supposed entities of mind and body, essence and materiality (or whatever dualism might be applied), would remain distinct, incompatible entities.

So, is Velmans' argument for a two perspectives thesis useful? (I note here that he claims his is a dual-aspect theory; but theory may be the wrong word here, for there is still no real clue for an end to the argument.) Does holding

true the dual validity of the experiential self (the first-person perspective) and mind as arising from physicality (the third-person perspective) actually contribute anything to the ancient debate about mind-body relations? Is not this exercise merely an epistemological one, nothing more than a word play? Velmans points out that it is, contrarily, an ontological exercise. The validity of conscious being, of arguing for a phenomenological self that has agency and capacity for changing one's physiological being, is at stake.

The question of who's in control may not be the right question at all. Are, though, questions really necessary, are they the way to go? What may be far more interesting, as Velmans suggests, is realizing that 'the thing-itself and

mind-itself are *fundamentally* psychophysical' (Velmans, p.94): phenomenal consciousness (used in a strictly Western way) and the physicality of being are part of the same self, the one being. The search for origins, first things, does not, perhaps, help at all.

Nine peers review Velmans' argument: John F. Kihlstrom, Todd E. Feinberg, Steven Torrance, Robert Van Gulick, Jeffrey Gray, Sam S. Rakover, Ron Chrisley and Aaron Sloman, and K. Ramakrishna Rao (for a different East-West account of consciousness), and each one's critique is systematically responded to and taken issue with in Velmans' final response. This is a thorough book well worth close reading. Highly recommended.