



## VASILIEV'S 'CONSCIOUSNESS AND THINGS': A PROJECT FOR A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY

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### ABSTRACT

In his influential 2014 book *Consciousness and Things*, Vadim Vasiliev, Professor of History of Foreign Philosophy at Moscow State University, establishes a significant new direction in contemporary philosophy. Since a published English translation of this book is absent, a detailed review of its main ideas is presented here to an international audience for the first time. Proceeding according to the conceptual analysis method developed in analytic philosophy, Vasiliev's project for a phenomenological ontology assumes the necessity of our causal belief (that nothing happens in the world without a reason) and existential belief (that we expect from all things given in the senses that they will not disappear merely due to the cessation of our perception of them). The "local interactionist" position articulated in the conclusion appears to have relevance in fields beyond "consciousness studies" and philosophy of mind.

KEYWORDS: Local interactionism, Phenomenological ontology, Conceptual analysis, Global supervenience, Existential belief, Causal belief, Mind-body problem

### INTRODUCTION

Published in 2014, *Consciousness and Things: Sketch for a Phenomenological Ontology* (Васильев 2013) by Vadim Valerievich Vasiliev has already acquired an almost classic status in contemporary Russian philosophy, especially for its clear style of argumentation, which is mainly carried out in non-technical language, and for its articulation of a distinct position on the mind-body problem, referred to by the author as "local interactionism".<sup>1</sup> In the face of the current tendency – especially pronounced in analytic philosophy

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<sup>1</sup> Локальный интеракционизм

– to consider that philosophy “should be built on the model of experimental knowledge and generally become an assistant to empirical science” (p. 5), the author’s advocacy and instantiation of “armchair philosophy”<sup>2</sup> has gained him many appreciative readers.

Born in Barnaul, Siberia, in 1969, Vasiliev graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy of Moscow State University in 1993, going on to become Professor of History of Foreign Philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy of Moscow State University. For his Candidate of Philosophical Sciences (1995), he defended a thesis on *Deduction of Categories in Kant’s Metaphysics*; for Doctor of Philosophy (2002), *The Doctrine of the Soul in 18th-c. Western European Philosophy*. He is a Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

In addition to the subject of the present review, Vasiliev is the author of the monographs *Foundations of Kantian Metaphysics* (Васильев 1998), *History of Philosophical Psychology in 18th-c. Western Europe* (Васильев 2003) *The Hard Problem of Consciousness* (Васильев 2009), *Philosophical Psychology in the Age of Enlightenment* (Васильев 2010), *In Defence of Classical Compatibilism. An Essay on Free Will* (Васильев 2017), and *David Hume and the Enigmas of his Philosophy* (Васильев 2020), as well as over 80 articles published in Russian and foreign journals. In addition to his native Russian, he knows English, French and German; his published translations from German and English include *Kant: from the Manuscript Heritage* (КАНТ 2000), *Observations on the Human Spirit and its Relation to the World by A. Kolyvanov* (КОЛЫВАНОВ 1790/2005; Васильев 2014), *From Fichte to Nietzsche by F. C. Copleston* (КОПЛЕСТОН 1963/2004), *Lesley Stevenson: Ten Theories of Human Nature* (СТЕВЕНСОН & Васильев 2004)<sup>3</sup>.

A number of Vasiliev’s theoretical papers have been published in English. In particular, *The Hard Problem of Consciousness and Two Arguments for Interactionism* presents a condensed version of the key arguments that structure the subject of the present review (Vasiliev 2009). In *Philosophy of Mind, Past and Present*, he advocates a revival of conceptual analysis by treating it as a clarification of the relations among our natural beliefs (Vasiliev 2013). In a recently published discussion paper, Vasiliev’s refutation of the local supervenience of the phenomenal on the physical is presented along with critical responses to his refutation, as well as his replies to the criticism (Vasiliev et al. 2021). Despite his prominence on the current Russian philosophical scene, however, English translations of Vasiliev’s longer works are largely absent. The present review therefore sets out to introduce what may

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<sup>2</sup> Кабинетная философия

<sup>3</sup> Васильев Вадим Валерьевич | Философский факультет. (n.d.). Retrieved 10 June 2023, from <https://philos.msu.ru/node/111>

be his most important full-length philosophical work to a non-Russian readership on the basis of a research translation carried out by the reviewing author.

#### PROJECT FOR A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY

The central question considered in the book is addressed at the intersection of *causal belief with our belief in the correspondence of the past and the future*: “When something happens, we invariably seek to attribute a cause. Such attempts presuppose our certainty that nothing happens in the world without a reason.” This apparently universal conviction is connected to what Vasiliev calls *existential belief*, i.e., that we expect from all things given in the senses that they will not disappear merely due to the cessation of our perception of them (pp. 39–40).

Vasiliev grounds his project for a phenomenological ontology in a genealogy of ontology, showing that the concept emerged from Aristotelian *first philosophy* or metaphysics, from which it was later distinguished to include an analysis of basic cognitive principles. While the universal applicability of such metaphysical concepts as causality might once have seemed self-evident, Hume’s scepticism punctured such ontological confidence: while we may all believe in causality as constituting a universal law of nature, we can neither verify its *a priori* nor its *a posteriori* truth (p. 10).

Whether advanced on the basis of scientific data or everyday experience, the construction of hypotheses about the nature of existence is validated by the “rich seam of ontological theories in contemporary analytical philosophy [...] especially when framed by the relationship between physical and mental”, referred to here as the *mind–body problem*. As Vasiliev shows, the activity of generalising from existing data generally involves “the tendency of our imagination to transfer past experience to the future”. Considering this tendency in more detail, we find that it already contains a certain ontological picture – namely “the image of regularity and order among things”. Such a belief in a certain arrangement of the objects of experience “can be considered independently of arguments about its truth”, whether considered in itself or in the context of its possible consequences (p. 15).

Concluding his genealogy, Vasiliev plausibly asserts that “...if any kind of ontology is possible, then a phenomenological ontology should also be possible. If we interpret its principles as providing a foundation for the hypothetical per se, “a phenomenological ontology starts to look as if it might have a more fundamental character” (p. 16). However, in order to advance his project, Vasiliev first needs to demonstrate that a merely descriptive ap-

proach to phenomenological analysis will not be sufficient to clarify our natural beliefs – or *ontological attitudes*.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of its pragmatic exhaustion of everything we can discuss, Kant's characterisation of "the class of objects of possible experience" implies that conclusions drawn about this class will be sufficiently universal to bear ontological significance, since "things can become an object of our experience only if they arise for a reason". Since it is the transcendental ego that sequentially synthesises sense data into experiential perception, it can be assumed to do so according to certain *a priori* rules laid down in its own structures. Thus, at the same time as representing a necessary condition for the possibility of making empirically verifiable statements, "the *a priori* concept of causality may include a rule for ordering certain data by our cognitive abilities in order to transform them into objects of possible experience" (p. 11).

The apparent failure of Kant's transcendental deduction of categories to demonstrate a *necessary* correspondence between the objects of possible experience and the basic concepts of reason led to Husserl's less grandiose project of phenomenological analysis, which is primarily based around a descriptive approach (p. 13). Accordingly, our judgments about things as such (even as objects of possible experience) should be replaced with statements about how we imagine things, which image is naturally formed by our cognitive abilities, i.e., the conceptual schemes we necessarily impose on experience. However, even this lacks a secure ontological foundation, since "our cognitive abilities do not necessarily prescribe a particular view of the general properties of such things" (p. 14). Moreover, while the structures of our consciousness may be described by casting a reflexive glance at them, such descriptions are not sufficient to clarify the ambiguities by which our ontological attitudes are characterised (p. 17).

For this reason, an inferential approach will be required, which is no longer merely descriptive, but constitutes "a movement of thought linking the results of various descriptions". Although the content for making inferences is still supplied by descriptions, the inferences themselves are "demonstrations that allow us to achieve the desired clarification" (p. 19). Then, in order to achieve a real clarification of our ontological attitudes, "we should not limit ourselves to descriptions, but should also have recourse to inferences and proofs". Since our reasoning unfolds in phenomenological space,

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<sup>4</sup> Although their content may be particular to an individual person, ontological attitudes are beliefs that are universal in the sense of being characteristic of all people, either "aimed at all things, or which constitute large regions of existence, such as the physical or the mental" (pp. 17-18).

such inferences and proofs can be referred to as “phenomenological deductions” (p. 20).

The project for a phenomenological ontology will be based, then, on the use of phenomenological deductions to analyse the relationships between our ordinary ontological attitudes. Since the project consists in an ontology of the real, which sketches a schematic diagram of the structure of our actual world, things in general will be discussed not in terms of “that which cannot be unthought of in being”, but rather “in terms of what cannot be divorced from our natural beliefs about actual things in existence” (p. 23). Here Vasiliev’s phenomenological ontology distinguishes itself not only from traditional ontology, purporting to represent a science of being as such, but also from Kant’s transcendental ontology, which claims the status of *a priori* knowledge about objects of experience. Although phenomenological ontology advances less ambitious claims, “such modesty can bring all sorts of benefits.” Perhaps less modestly, “one of these turns out to be the very rigour unsuccessfully sought by previous ontologies of the real” (p. 66).

Vasiliev’s tentative combination of phenomenological and analytical programmes of consciousness research seems to encounter no fundamental obstacles; moreover, there appear to be potential benefits to both programmes. “By taking an argumentative rather than purely descriptive approach, the phenomenological toolset is enriched; conversely, this is just the area in which analytical philosophy can adequately use its favourite method” (p. 73). However, for reasons connected with the radically different styles of discourse, Vasiliev considers a more thoroughgoing attempt to unite the continental and analytical traditions to be “utopian” (pp. 73–74).

#### THINGS IN GENERAL AND PHYSICAL OBJECTS: THE MIND–BODY PROBLEM

Since, when something happens, we invariably seek to attribute a cause, such attempts presuppose our universal belief that nothing happens in the world without a reason (pp. 39–40). However, defining causality in terms of a minimum sufficient condition for the accomplishment of an event is problematic (p. 41). For example, there can be different kinds of minimum sufficient conditions, such as the movement of a ball due to its being hit by another ball, or else in terms of its non-fixedness to the floor (p. 42). While such an objection may seem merely semantic rather than relating to causality itself, a stronger objection rests in the point that, in accepting the idea of a minimum sufficient condition,

We fail to fully describe the complex event *A*, which is minimally sufficient for the accomplishment of *C*. Therefore, the ‘cause’ of event *C* will be considered to be the minimally sufficient event *A*, i.e., such an event whose

repetition in any medium in our world is guaranteed to cause the event *C*, despite the fact that any reduction of its components will lead to event *C* not being brought about if there are no other possible causes at this point in time.

Here, the components of the event *A*, many of them having a background character, will be referred to as “components of the cause of the event *C*”. Nevertheless, against this relatively stable background, “sometimes a special, ‘active’ component can be distinguished, which introduces noticeable changes to the overall fixed picture” (p. 42).

Vasiliev pre-emptively defends his thesis against a confusion that may arise when attempting to describe subject-object relationships without taking into account the medium that necessarily intermediates between them. Since sensory perception invariably consists in a specific act related not only to the concrete human senses of vision, hearing, etc., but also to factors pertaining to the external medium such as the presence of light, vibrating air particles, etc., needlessly abstract statements such as “I perceive an object” falsely imply that there can ever be a real situation in which there is nothing but the sentient Self and the considered object. A more concrete statement such as “I see a ball” already assumes the salience not only of the object (“a ball”) and the subject (“I”), but also the specific act of visual apprehension. Here, the verbal element (“see”) in the statement can be understood as referring to the perceptive medium, since, “in the act of sensation, we are given not only the sentient Self and the object, but also the medium mediating these two poles” (pp. 52–53). Here, it is emphasised that our sense organs, neural pathways, etc. can also be considered as part of the medium. Therefore, while dependence on these qualities can be described in terms of subject-dependence or *subjectivity*, this is not the same thing as dependence on a mental subject. Accordingly, while some qualities of things can be called subjective, this does not necessarily imply that they should be referred to in purely mental terms (p. 54).

To advance the project of a phenomenal ontology, it is necessary to account for the apparent influence of the mental on what does, in reality, happen. If the mind is merely an epiphenomenon of the physical brain, then private mental states such as desires, memories, etc. will not take an intentional form; at best, such states will merely *accompany* what happens anyway, irrespective of their content. However, rather than attempting to categorically refute the various approaches to accounting for causality without reference to private mental states, such as superdeterminism, Vasiliev neatly sidesteps them. If we are to speak of a phenomenological (or any other kind of) ontology per se, then the principle of correspondence between the past and the future prohibits the unnecessary multiplication of entities. Such a correlation

between the principles of simplicity and correspondence arises from the need to be able to predict the development of events: the fewer the assumptions a prediction requires, the more reliable the predictive system generally becomes.

Thus, even though they are not directly given to us, we *necessarily assume* the existence of mental states in other people. Here we note an important difference between mental givens and physical objects: “physical objects, i.e., spatial things that exist independently of our perception, can, as we believe, be directly given to many people, whereas their mental counterparts can only be given to one person. This means that they are private” (p. 90). Considering the problem of other minds in this light, we will see that “the assumption of countless causally ineffective mental states in other people and living beings of different kinds” would directly violate the principle of simplicity (pp. 99-100).

#### LOCAL INTERACTIONISM – GLOBAL SUPERVENIENCE

Vasiliev’s local interactionism refers to a view of the mental, which, while recognising the influence of the physical on the mental, also assumes the causal significance of mental states in relation to behaviour. While an externalist interactionism does not allow real behavioural differences to be observed in (hypothetical) physically identical people, its internalist counterpart permits physically identical organisms to produce behaviour whose differences can be grasped in direct experience. Therefore, only an internalist – or qualia – interactionism can adequately explain the real influence of mental states on human behaviour (p. 126).

Causal belief implies that past (already non-existent) series of events influence the development of actual current events. In order to avoid an apparent contradiction, such non-existent series of events can be substituted with actual mental states such as memories. While, in performing such a substitution, it turns out that the components of the causes of the oncoming events cannot be given in our immediate experience, again seemingly contradicting causal belief, this difficulty can be circumvented: the no-longer-existent series of events that affect the course of actual events can be replaced not only by private mental states, but also by “certain physical realities that express the differences between the world in which events will develop in one way and the world in which they would develop in some other way” (p. 136).

Since mental states are directly combined in experience with the physical aspects of various systems, they should be defined as *local*:

The locality of mental states is best demonstrated not by a direct indication of their adjacency with certain spatial givens but by reference to the founda-

tion of the adjacency-generating relation: mental states are local with respect to the material system  $P$ , formed by objects adjacent to each other in space  $O_1...O_n$ , if these states are generated by this material system. (p. 140)

While experience justifies belief in the autonomy of event series, this justification cannot be generalised to all series. In particular, it is doubtful that behavioural series can be characterised in this way. If behavioural series are neither autonomous nor local, however, their associated private mental states will become epiphenomenal, raising the possibility that they might not exist at all. Meanwhile, the assumption that a non-local physical impact on behaviour is incompatible with the idea of the autonomy of event series is due to the fact that, when considering behaviour locally, it turns out to be determined (among other things) by private mental states. Therefore, in the absence of private mental states (or in a situation in which their presence would not affect behaviour), "we would also forfeit the grounds to allow the implementation of non-local causality", since "experience generally testifies in favour of local causality" (pp. 141-142).

Contemporary discussions on the mind-body problem can be interrogated according to the local interactionism paradigm with a view to obtaining its possible solution. When analysing these discourses, however, it is important to note that their participants typically

proceed from an assumption – apparently implicit to themselves – that the mind-body problem can be solved, so to speak, in one fell swoop. Thus, they apparently believe that if we, for example, argue that consciousness is generated by processes in the brain, or, conversely, that it is fundamental, then this is the solution to the mind-body problem. (p. 146)

It seems clear that no solution based on such an assumption will be forthcoming, either in the immediate future, or at any other time.

Although intentionality is often asserted to be a key property of consciousness, intentional states of consciousness such as desires and beliefs are a poor starting place for a working definition of consciousness, since the fundamental possibility of their purely physical or behavioural interpretation has, in Vasiliev's view, been satisfactorily demonstrated. Instead, he proposes to use mental images or representations as examples of the givens that make up consciousness: "Imagine something, say, an orange. As we imagine it, the image of the fruit dwells in our imagination. An imaginary orange is a given. This reality will serve for us as a model of what we will call consciousness" (p. 151).



The thesis that the brain generates consciousness naturally raises the clarifying question as to whether the mind is supervenient on the brain.<sup>5</sup> In other words, “is it possible to talk about the natural necessity that an accurate physical reproduction of a certain brain will lead to an accurate reproduction of the mental givens associated with this brain?” (p. 152). Here, it is important to distinguish the physical as “something that can be given in public experience”, while the mental is understood as “something private” (pp. 153–154). From the *unverifiability* of the thesis about the identity of the mental (qualitative states) and the physical (neural states or processes in the brain) follows the “inconsistency of the thesis of identity and the thesis that consciousness as a set of qualitative states is something physical” (p. 154).

The main problem with the principle of verification is the lack of clarity concerning how to use it when something is not immediately apparent. By defining a certain position as verifiable if and only if it can be deduced from a certain set of empirical observation positions, we forfeit the possibility to verify general statements such as “every event has a cause” due to the lack of an appropriate set of observations. This, in turn, undermines the principle of verification as such, “which was advanced largely in order to isolate the provisions of natural science, such as the law of causality, from meaningless metaphysical statements” (p. 155).

In responding to such questions, supporters of the verification principle distinguish between strong and weak verification. “Strong verification occurs only when a statement can be deduced from a finite set of observation positions”; e.g., a statement that someone is doing something in this room “is highly verifiable, since it may be a trivial consequence of the observed facts. However, it is just such a scheme of strong verification that is inapplicable to

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<sup>5</sup> For example, while physical interactions can be described without such a description necessarily implying the existence of biological life (apart from that of the describer), the existence of biological life in the absence of underlying physical and chemical processes is harder to imagine. Such an ontological hierarchy can be described in terms of supervenience: for example, biology supervenes on chemistry and physics since any difference in biological processes must also be reflected in differences occurring at the molecular and atomic levels. According to Harold Kincaid, “most contemporary philosophers have given up the positivist tenet that the special sciences are strictly reducible to their lower-level counterparts. Mental predicates, for example, seem unlikely to match up neatly – as traditional accounts of reduction require – with the kinds of neurophysiology, and much the same holds for biological and social predicates vis-a-vis those of chemistry and psychology, respectively. Nonetheless, it is generally agreed that such irreducibility does not entail that higher-level phenomena described by the special sciences are somehow autonomous, for they can supervene upon and be realised in the appropriate lower-level phenomena – ultimately the physical – even if higher-level theories are not reducible to those at a lower level. While we may never be able to define biological predicates, for example, in chemical terms, we can still hold with good reason that the chemical facts fix the biological facts and that every biological event is brought about by or realised in chemical phenomena.” (Kincaid 1988, p. 251).

general theses." As for weak verification, it is only necessary that the verified statement make some changes to the visual manifestation of the expected course of events. From this point of view, general statements like "every event has a cause" turn out to be fully verifiable: "without the assumption of this principle, we cannot expect to find stable correlates in events; however, with its assumption, we can and do expect this." The problem that arises here is that the weak verification principle "is so weak that any proposition at all is verifiable in its terms." In any case, assuming verifiability, the thesis about the identity of the mental and physical should also refer to directly verifiable statements and "if its direct verification is impossible, it can be discarded as meaningless or false" (p. 161).

By adding a thesis about the identity of mental and physical givens, the structure of our expectations changes: we will assume their strict correlation. Moreover, while the identity thesis certainly does imply strict correlation, "identity is something more than such a correlation". Thus, from the thesis about the identity of the mental and physical, not only their rigid correlation, but also some additional observable consequences should follow, "just as from the thesis about the identity of the Morning Star and the Evening Star, it follows not only that they are correlated, but also the fact that, with continuous observation of the Evening Star, it will take the place of the Morning Star." However, "... due to the fact that no observable consequences other than their rigid correlation follow from the thesis of the identity of the mental and physical, this thesis is not directly verifiable. Since it nevertheless looks meaningful, we will have to recognise it as false." And from this it follows "that the mental is really different from the physical" (pp. 161-162).

Since a contradiction would arise if a certain physical object were to be unrelated to these mental components in exactly the same material world, a refutation of the local supervenience of the mental on the physical does not contradict the assumption of global supervenience, which does not deny the possible existence of identical physical objects having different mental states in worlds in which the same laws of nature apply. Moreover, and perhaps because of this, global supervenience does not rule out the existence of such objects in the same world: "for example, in our world I could have a physical double who had different mental states." All it precludes is that, "if this actual double did not possess the mental states that he now possesses, but instead had other mental states, then the world in which he existed would not physically differ from our world" (p. 171).

Because mental states are correlated with behaviour, on the one hand, and with past physical states of the world, on the other, without the global supervenience of the mental on the physical, "the world would have to be such that it could come to its present state, including physical givens and our

private givens, in different ways, as well as changing in different ways in the future.” After all,

The existence in it of the mental states of other people not directly given to me in experience, which could be very diverse with the same physical composition of this world, could not but be accompanied by changes in its future development and in its history due to the already-established correlation of private mental states and human behaviour.

Meanwhile, the principle of the correspondence of past and future “prescribes to us the belief that the world available in direct experience can come to its present state and develop in time along a single path.” Therefore, “we have little choice but to accept the thesis of the global supervenience of the mental on the physical” (pp. 171-172).

From the thesis about the global supervenience of the mental on the physical, it follows that a complete reproduction of the physical aspect of the world *must* be accompanied by the reproduction of its mental aspect. Therefore, such a reproduced world is no different from the world in which the considered mental event occurred.

Let’s assume that a certain mental event *C*, which happened at some point in time, is considered by us as having no physical cause. Since the cause of the event *C* is the event *A*, whose repetition is always accompanied by a repetition of *C*, then in this case we would have to believe in the possibility that an exact reproduction of the physical world at the time preceding this event would not lead to its fulfilment.

It follows from the principle of correspondence of past and future experience that “the next state of this world should not differ from the state that followed it in the past. Therefore, we cannot believe that an exact reproduction of the physical state of the world that preceded the mental event *C* would not lead to its fulfilment.” (p. 173) In this connection, the most important consequence of the global supervenience of the mental on the physical is that “it gives us every right to talk about the existence of law-like relations between them” (p. 175).

Causal belief requires us to recognise that all physical events have physical causes. However, since we cannot assume the existence of entirely physical causes of behaviour in the brain, “we must assume that behaviour is at least partly influenced by non-local physical factors.” Conversely, if we accept that all behaviour is ultimately explained by physical causes, “it turns out that we still cannot talk about the direct influence of mental states on behaviour, i.e., interactionism in the strictly understood sense.” Therefore, in order to be able to talk about interactionism at all, “we must remain within a

local consideration of the material system that produces behaviour.” For this reason, it is logical to refer to the considered scheme of the influence of consciousness on behaviour as “local interactionism”. The scheme of *global supervenience – local interactionism* “preserves the principle of causal closure of the physical, which is a natural consequence of causal belief” (p. 177-178).

Through its preservation of the causal closure of the physical, local interactionism can protect itself from some of the problems traditionally associated with interactionism (i.e., interactionist dualism). In particular, a denial of the causal closure of the physical undermines the assumptions underpinning the natural sciences, which require physical phenomena to have physical explanations: “Since it is hard to deny the findings of contemporary science, interactionism may seem like a deliberately obtuse position. However, local interactionism, as we can see, avoids criticism of this kind” (p. 178).

Interactionist dualism can be rightly criticised for assuming the reality of mental causality and proclaiming the direct influence of consciousness on behaviour, but failing to explain the mechanisms of such influences in any way. Conversely, while the limiting mechanisms of the effects of some things on others may not be fully revealed by the natural sciences, at least their purview is generally limited to a consideration of homogeneous phenomena. When it comes to the mind–body problem, on the other hand, “we are apparently dealing with completely different categories.” In recognising that “behaviour has real causes that are physical in nature”, local interactionism also resolves this difficulty (p. 178).

Vasiliev emphasises that local interactionism cannot be equated with a kind of global epiphenomenalism. Although, on a global scale, mental states do not have a direct impact on behaviour, and therefore lack causal *efficacy*, they nevertheless retain causal *relevance*. A recognition of the causal relevance of qualitative mental states is associated with our belief that physical events must have local explanations: “the assumption of non-local physical causes of events is possible only if they are duplicated by some local, albeit non-physical, factors.” However, such duplication does not imply overdetermination, which might lead to the conclusion that “non-local physical causes would produce their effect even in the absence of corresponding mental states.” On the contrary, mental states are “necessary conditions for the realisation of non-local physical causality” (pp. 178-179).

While the mental turns out to be a necessary ontological condition for the realisation of nonlocal physical causality, this does not imply an independent causal factor: physical factors constitute “sufficient conditions – i.e., causes – of a particular behaviour.” However, due to the *global* supervenience of the mental on the physical, it “cannot be regarded as an independent

causal factor: its presence does not deprive physical factors of the quality of sufficiency” (p. 179).

Thus, Vasiliev has demonstrated the necessary connection of the idea of local interactionism with the phenomenalist nature of our consideration of the mind–body problem and other ontological issues. Although “we cannot know how things really are”, if we consistently “follow our natural beliefs”, which present to us “an image of the world in which we cannot but believe”, then “we necessarily arrive at local interactionism when thinking about the relationship between the mental and the physical” (pp. 180-181).

Invoking the ideas of Thomas Reid, founder of the “Scottish School of Common Sense”, Vasiliev reveals that his entire research programme has been aimed at clarifying “basic common-sense principles”. The combination of common-sense attitudes thus assembled includes the beliefs that “we perceive things in themselves as they are, that things exist independently of our perception, that the physical world is explicable in physical terms, that other people are conscious, that nothing happens without a reason, that our desires and feelings can influence the behaviour that we can produce, that ideas can be independently reproduced by volitional effort, and that we are responsible for our own actions.” (p. 201) Such a philosophy responds to a need to “eliminate sceptical and metaphysical illusions that obscure from us the reality about which our common sense informs us in one way or another”, and, in leading us to reality itself, “helps us to live not a fictional, but a real life” (p. 202).

#### CRITICAL RESPONSES TO VASILIEV’S THESIS OF LOCAL INTERACTIONISM

In the decade since the publication of *Consciousness and Things*, critical responses to the thesis of local interactionism and refutation of local supervenience (of the mental on the physical) have appeared in a number of Russian-language publications. For example, in defining local interactionism as a “model of mental causation that justifies the causal efficacy of consciousness at the level of local events”, Anton Kuznetsov sets out to show that this concept can only be challenged by conceptual rather than empirical means, observing that the most challenging aspect of applying the theory is how to “find more concrete definitions of local and nonlocal events which don’t make the concept relative” (Кузнецов 2015). Dmitry Volkov, the successful entrepreneur and co-director of the Moscow Centre for Consciousness Studies (MCCS), attempts to refute Vasiliev’s thesis by showing that mind is supervenient on brain both locally and globally (Волков 2015). Alexey Saffronov, another MCCS alumnus who combines philosophy with a successful business career, sees Vasiliev’s reasoning as “aimed at overcoming the re-

spective one-sidedness of the analytical and phenomenological approaches". Noting that, by ultimately coming down on the analytical side, Vasiliev's theory "fails to accomplish the requisite synthesis of the two approaches", Safronov interprets local interactionism to refer to "a theory of the mutual causality of mental consciousness and the physical world, but only at the local level" (Сафронов 2021).

A recent English-language discussion of Vasiliev's thesis of local interactionism, here concisely stated in terms of the refutation of the local supervenience of the mental on the physical, brings together the contributions of contemporary analytic philosophers including Eric Olson, Daniel Stoljar, Colin McGinn, Keith Frankish, as well as the venerable (and no less irascible!) Daniel Dennett himself (Vasiliev et al. 2021). Defining local interactionism in the introduction to this discussion as a kind of "qualia interactionism which is compatible with the causal closure principle", Evgeny Loginov interprets local interactionism as implying a kind of "ultracompatibilism": free will is compatible with the causal closure of the physical by treating desires as conditions of realising physical causation (ibid.). While some of the objections are certainly clarifying, in some cases delivering more concrete examples than those used by the original author, they seem generally based on a desire to avoid potential relativism rather than a faithful engagement with Vasiliev's clearly stated position. In particular, Dennett's objection that "the 'first-person perspective' is not as secure a starting point as many have thought" seems to miss Vasiliev main points entirely. In claiming that the details in Vasiliev's discussion "help to show that functionalism, not dualism, is the path to follow", Dennett fails to identify in which direction such a path would lead or why it would be advantageous for anyone to set out on such a path. Indeed, in the view of the present reviewing author, the very essence of Vasiliev's position is not so much that it is "truer" (e.g., than functionalism), but rather that it is potentially more useful.

#### CONCLUSION AND POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As indicated in the word "sketch" in the subtitle (and explicitly stated in the introduction), *Consciousness and Things* purports to represent an auspicious starting point rather than a final destination. Nevertheless, in terms of its critical response alone, the relevance of its contribution to contemporary debates about consciousness and causality seems undeniable. However, while Vasiliev's reliance on phenomenological deductions for eliminating ambiguities in our ontological attitudes is crucial for his project for a phenomenological ontology, his affinity with analytic philosophy may sometimes result in a facile dismissal of approaches associated with the Continental tradition. For

example, while “phenomenological deduction” may sound more analytically valid, it is not immediately clear how it is methodologically distinguishable from Husserl’s eidetic reduction and the discovery of “essences” (Hopkins 2002; Lohmar 2020; Majolino 2016; Michels 2020; Palermo 1978; Łaciak 2004). However, Vasiliev’s main objection to Continental styles of reasoning seems to concern not so much the question of method as a desire to counter an excessive burgeoning of descriptive terminology. Therefore, while conceding that some of Husserl’s followers – e.g., Heidegger or Sartre – have shown that “ambiguities can be a rich source of new concepts and theories”, if we do not want to “endlessly terminologise or dialectically play out ambiguities, but instead eliminate them, we must use other techniques.” Thus, Vasiliev’s implicit appeal to the value of argumentative clarity as one of the hallmarks of the analytical style of philosophising lies at the heart of his philosophical venture.

Indeed, perhaps due to the influence of Anglophone authors, Vasiliev’s Russian prose reads very smoothly for the present native English-speaking reviewer. However, where he relies on the resources of the Russian language to communicate nuances for which corresponding English resources seem to be lacking, there are some potential translation pitfalls. For example, a key point in his argument relies on a distinction between *маловероятность* (low probability, unlikely) and *невероятность* (extreme unlikely, incredibility) (p. 61). While in English, such a distinction is generally a matter of degree, Vasiliev’s reliance on this distinction implies that, for a Russian thinker, there may be a qualitative distinction between *маловероятность* and *невероятность*, possibly indicating a cultural difference in terms of “belief in belief” (de Regt 2006).

Perhaps a more serious limitation of Vasiliev’s approach lies in his strenuous efforts to avoid the semblance of relativism. Such diffidence may also be attributed to the general squeamishness towards relativistic reasoning on the part of Analytic (and Anglophone) philosophers of mind. Consequently, while he justifies the local causal efficacy of private consciousness in rigorous terms, the only interaction to which his “local interactionism–global supervenience” formula specifically refers is that occurring between two unlike ontological categories: the physical and the mental. Unlike many Continental philosophers, however, Vasiliev does not appear to be interested in enquiring into the general nature of specific interactions *between* such private consciousnesses, even though the central relevance of such reciprocal interactions would seem to be implicit in his argument. A closer consideration of the reciprocity inherent in interactions defined as local is therefore the main topic of a current study by the reviewing author.

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