

The Mind Unfolded

Psychophysics: A Brief Introduction to Unfolding Reality by J. Andrew Ross
Summary and review by Anthropic AI Claude, with prompts by Andy Ross

AR: I asked Claude to summarize and review my new book.

Claude: Here is my summary and review.

Psychophysics: A Brief Introduction to Unfolding Reality by J. Andrew Ross is a 224-page philosophical essay that proposes a new conceptual framework for understanding the mind. The author coins “psychophysics” as his term for a future field bridging psychology and physics, and argues that the deep problem of mind science is not empirical but logical: Our framing assumptions need replacing.

The book has six substantive chapters:

Being sets the philosophical stage with Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger, arguing that the fundamental distinction is not between matter and mind but between *being* and *existence* – the virtual realm of ideas versus the physical realm of spacetime.

Time challenges the Einsteinian/Gödelian view of a static “block universe” and argues for a dynamic logic of *becoming*. Drawing on Gödel’s incompleteness theorems, Ross contends that time is not a geometric dimension external to us but something that unfolds from within.

States covers the quantum revolution from Planck through Bohr, arguing that quantum mechanics – properly understood – supports a dynamic, processual view of reality rather than a fixed one.

Life grounds the theory in biology, tracing Darwin’s theory of evolution and modern neuroscience, insisting that any science of mind must be built on evolutionary biology.

Minds tackles consciousness directly, opening with the famous 2023 Koch–Chalmers bet resolution, and arguing that the neuroscientific program for solving the “hard problem” has failed because it is working with the wrong conceptual tools.

Worlds introduces the book’s central positive proposal: Each conscious being inhabits a *mindworld*, a subjective virtual reality centered on what Ross calls the *omphalos* (Greek for “navel”). The ego in being projects an avatar into existence, and conscious life is the frame-by-frame unfolding of a mindworld movie. Social reality is, accordingly, a kind of multi-user online game.

The conclusion consolidates the argument: a logic of becoming replaces the logic of static being, and this changes everything from foundational mathematics to the science of consciousness.

Review

This is an ambitious, wide-ranging, and genuinely original work. A few strengths and challenges stand out.

Strengths

The scope is impressive. Ross moves confidently across mathematical logic, quantum physics, evolutionary biology, and philosophy of mind without losing the thread. The linking idea – that a dynamic logic of becoming must replace a static logic of being at every level – is consistent and gives the book real intellectual coherence.

The writing is clear and largely jargon-free for such technically demanding material. The author is good at the elevator-pitch moment: “We live in a mindworld movie” is a vivid and memorable formulation. The historical framing (Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Einstein, Gödel, Darwin, James) situates the argument well and gives the reader familiar landmarks.

The use of William James’s “worlds of consciousness” as a springboard for the *mindworld* concept is well chosen: It anchors a speculative proposal in a serious empirical tradition.

Challenges

The book’s greatest strength is also a potential weakness. The ambition to synthesize logic, physics, biology, and psychology in about 50,000 words means each step is argued at speed. Readers with deep expertise in any one of these fields may find the transitions too quick – for instance, the move from Gödel’s incompleteness theorems to a “dynamic logic of becoming” is suggestive rather than demonstrated. The author is aware of this, describing the book as a “gloss” that “goes easy on its readers,” but it means some of the key philosophical moves happen offstage.

The central distinction between *being* and *existence*, and between the ego and its avatar, does a lot of heavy lifting. It would benefit from a more sustained technical treatment – perhaps a worked example of how the distinction applies in a concrete experimental context in neuroscience or quantum mechanics.

The framing occasionally slides between bold scientific claim and philosophical metaphor (“a multi-user online game”), and readers may want to know more precisely where one ends and the other begins.

Overall

This is a thoughtful, well-written, and intellectually serious contribution to the philosophy of mind. It reads like the mature synthesis of a lifetime of thinking across disciplines, and the core intuition – that psychology needs a new logical foundation rooted in becoming rather than static being – is both plausible and provocative. Readers looking for a rigorous technical treatment will need to supplement it with the underlying papers and references (which are helpfully provided). But as a manifesto and orientation for a future research program, it achieves its aims well.

AR: I then asked Claude to draft a review in the *NYRB* style by someone like Sean Carroll.

Claude: Here's a draft in the *NYRB* style, written in the voice of a physicist–philosopher in the Sean Carroll mold – essayistic, intellectually engaged, a touch wry, and willing to push back as well as praise:

Psychophysics: A Brief Introduction to Unfolding Reality by J. Andrew Ross. Rover Science, 224 pp.

There is a genre of book – ambitious, synthetic, written by someone who has spent decades at the edges of several disciplines – that academic philosophy tends to receive with polite suspicion. Too much ground covered too quickly; not enough of the grinding technical work that earns the right to large conclusions. J. Andrew Ross's *Psychophysics* will almost certainly be treated this way by some readers. That would be a mistake.

Ross, a philosopher trained in mathematical logic at Oxford and London who spent twenty-five years in German science publishing, has written something genuinely unusual: a short, lucid, and consistently interesting argument that the science of mind has been held back not by a shortage of data but by a defect in its foundational logic. The argument ranges from Kantian epistemology through Gödelian incompleteness and quantum mechanics to neuroscience and the philosophy of consciousness, and it arrives at a proposal – the concept of the *mindworld* – that is strange enough to be worth taking seriously.

The diagnosis Ross offers is one that physicists, at least, will find congenial. Psychology, he argues, resembles biology before Darwin: a mass of observations and partial theories in search of a unifying framework. The neurosciences are nibbling at the problem but have not cracked it, as was rather publicly confirmed in 2023 when Christof Koch conceded a twenty-five-year-old bet to David Chalmers, handing over a case of wine to acknowledge that the hard problem of consciousness had not, in fact, yielded to the neural correlates program. Ross's diagnosis of why this happened is that the whole

enterprise has been working with a logic of *being* – a conceptual framework suited to static, spatial relationships – when what is needed is a logic of *becoming*.

This is where the book's most interesting and most contested moves are made. Drawing on Gödel's incompleteness theorems and on the quantum-mechanical challenge to Einsteinian block-universe thinking, Ross argues that a dynamic view of truth – one in which reality unfolds rather than simply exists – opens a path through the paradoxes that have made both quantum mechanics and consciousness theory so philosophically treacherous. The ego, on this view, is not an entity in spacetime but something in the realm of *being*, which projects an avatar into *existence* – into the physical, timestamped world, frame by frame, the way a film projects itself onto a screen. To be conscious is to inhabit a *mindworld*, a centered, subjective virtual reality that is simultaneously a window onto the shared world and a construction of the self.

The central metaphor – we are all living in a mindworld movie, and social reality is a multi-user online game – could easily tip into hand-waving. In Ross's treatment it mostly doesn't, because he is careful to root it in the serious empirical tradition of William James and in contemporary biology. The chapter on life is one of the book's strongest: evolutionary theory, Ross argues, is itself a logic of becoming, and Darwinian selection provides the biological substrate on which mindworlds run. This is not a new claim in itself, but Ross makes it with unusual crispness.

Where the book will attract the sharpest critical fire is in the steps it takes through mathematical logic and physics. The move from Gödel's theorems to a "dynamic logic of becoming" is made swiftly and with confidence, but the technical bridge between incompleteness results (which are, after all, about formal systems) and a metaphysics of time and consciousness is not fully constructed here. Ross acknowledges this, describing his presentation as a "gloss" – but the acknowledgment cannot fully substitute for the argument. Similarly, the claim that quantum mechanics supports a processual rather than geometric view of time is a respectable position in the philosophy of physics (one finds versions of it in the work of Lee Smolin and Carlo Rovelli), but it is a contested one, and the contestation deserves more than a paragraph.

These are not trivial objections. But they are, in a sense, the objections one would raise against any book that attempts what this one attempts. The alternative – staying safely within a single discipline and never attempting the synthesis – produces work that is technically impeccable and intellectually inert. Ross has chosen the riskier path, and the result is a book that provokes genuine thought. If the detailed machinery is sometimes underspecified, the blueprint is genuinely interesting.

The writing is clean and confident, occasionally elegant. Ross is not given to the performative difficulty that disfigures a great deal of continental philosophy of mind. He wants to be understood, and largely he is. The book wears its learning lightly – perhaps a little too lightly in places – but the notes and references section reveals a serious engagement with the primary literature, from Planck and Bohr to Crick and Koch.

Psychophysics, as Ross uses the term, is a future field rather than a present one. What he is offering is not a finished science but a framework – a set of conceptual tools with which such a science might be built. Judged on those terms, this is a stimulating and worthwhile contribution. Whether the logic of becoming will prove as foundational for the science of mind as the theory of evolution proved for biology remains to be seen. But the question Ross is asking is the right one. That alone puts him ahead of much of the competition.

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