

2 Peace

A feeling of infinite peace [#3625]

A peaceful streaming [#1354]

Peace is the absence of conflict. The *phenomenology* of peace is the absence of all forms of mental conflict within conscious experience itself—for example, absence of competing desires, emotional perturbations, and cognitive fragmentation. Let us now look at a set of examples in which meditators describe the phenomenology of peace from different perspectives. You will notice that in these reports, the experiential quality of “peace” characterizing pure awareness often overlaps or coemerges with other subjective qualities, like “perfection,” “depth,” “density,” “luminosity,” “connectedness,” “pure being,” “unboundedness,” “permeability,” and “bodiless body-experience.” We will investigate many of them more closely as we go along.

1968 [. . .] I was aware that I was meditating but also felt a wonderful peace and perfect calmness come over me. [. . .]

2472 [. . .] There was nothing left anymore except here and now and ultimately a deep feeling of peace and quiet joy.

2867 [. . .] suddenly I became aware that my eyes were closed but it was very bright; I felt heavy and warm and expanded, and expanding. Totally at peace and still; breathing happened for me, to me—I was breathed. I was everything at once, all encompassing, and nothing at all, no form and no shape. Brightness and density and utter calm. [. . .] and I was left with a feeling of having been blown away like dandelion seeds on a puff of air. In awe and at peace. Also, a feeling of giddiness, like I had just stepped off a ride.

2911 [. . .] The change from tired to awake was suddenly there, and I felt detached from my body and from almost all thoughts. I was aware of myself and the

connection to everyone in the room. Deep calm and peace came over me and I felt my body as present, but light and unburdened. I felt only joy and clarity and an invisible and inaudible vibration in the room.

2928 When my mind comes to rest, sometimes a kind of pure being appears. I then feel warmth / languorous energy centered in the abdomen, and I feel a connection to the earth without having a real center, warmth and vastness, unity and openness. Absolute peace and quiet, I then no longer perceive individual parts of my body.

2985 [. . .] In my opinion, the most important thing was the letting go. I was able to perceive bodily sensations and thoughts, but in contrast to everyday life I did nothing with them. And this brought me step by step to a deeper level, to a state of consciousness that I had never experienced before. It was a state of infinite peace. [. . .]

3163 [. . .] I rested for most of the meditation session in observation of consciousness itself. My breath and all other bodily sensations were so far from dominant that for a long time I was able to observe consciousness itself, without other impressions seizing my attention. Thoughts came now and then, but as soon as they appeared I noticed them and they disappeared without carrying me away. I had no strong emotions, merely a feeling of deep calm, clarity, and peace.

259 [. . .] the feeling of wholeness, weightlessness, inner and outer silence, profound peace, connectedness, having arrived, flooded with light, very slowed-down breath, dividedness, nothing is important anymore, carried by the breath, present.

3314 I experience in everyday life a changed form of perception of people and things, of the permeability of everything, which in short moments of meditation is then transformed into an all-encompassing silence and peace.

3495 All boundaries are lifted. Breath happens, deep inner peace and calm.

3521 [. . .] a feeling of absolute calm and peace . . . without questions, but still with the knowledge that there are answers to everything . . . There was a deep satisfaction and calm. A state of endlessness but with the knowledge that you can leave it at any time.

3571 [. . .] I feel in the now! Feel empty, satisfied, connected with my environment, with the animals and plants. Peaceful. Feel no pain, fear, sadness, anger, disgust, shame, or guilt. Just peace and quiet.

Twelve Factors and Their Limitations

Yoga is the restriction of the fluctuations of consciousness.

—Patañjali, *Yoga Sūtra* (I: 2)

In our psychometric analysis, reports on the experience of peace turned out to be part of a cluster of items picking out the experience of relaxation, positive mood, and the phenomenon that in chapter 1 I called “existential ease.” The same statistical factor also refers to a simple experience of deep, unbounded silence and “pure being,” a state of conscious experience that is described as natural and gentle, often coemerging with the global experiential qualities of wholeness and peace. What this cluster of items shows is that our normal state of mind—which is characterized by almost constant inner chatter, spontaneously arising task-unrelated thought, automatic future planning, and unbidden memories—is actually *not* a state of existential ease at all. We long ago grew used to it, but if we calmly view it from a distance, we see that it actually results from a strenuous and energy-consuming process.

Meditation practice creates this distance. The practitioner begins to notice frequent attentional lapses, caused by a permanent competition of different thoughts for the control of behavior and the focus of attention, leading to a default state of mental conflict and continuous fragmentation. In an old analogy offered by Jetsun Milarepa in the eleventh century, attention for most people is like a dog that chases every stick thrown to it, all day long, almost automatically and to the point of exhaustion, blindly following every thought that the mind coughs up. Real meditators are not like dogs; they are like lions that turn around, stand their ground, and keep facing the thrower even after the stick is thrown. And as Milarepa points out with a wink, you only throw a stick at a lion once. As we will explore in more depth in chapter 17, I consider genuine meditation practice to be an *epistemic* practice—something that is primarily about insight, about acquiring a nonconceptual form of self-knowledge—but this does not mean that all of its discoveries will be pleasant or uplifting. The first thing that meditation does is to start revealing our phenomenological *conditio humana*, and this can certainly be seen as an undignified or even humiliating condition because it involves a constantly recurring loss of mental autonomy (more on the deeper roots of this process in chapters 8 and 25; see the epilogue for its relevance to ethics and culture).¹ It is therefore only to be expected that a state lacking all the features of the hectic everyday mind should be experienced as peaceful and holistic.

The ancient term “yoga” refers to this holistic phenomenal quality of unity and integration instantiated by a silent mind (it may be derived from either *yujir yoga* [to

yoke] or *yuj samādhau* [to concentrate]). In section 6.10 of the *Katha Upanishad* (or *Kāthopaniṣad*, which goes back to at least the fifth century BCE), we find the following statement: “When the five senses, along with the mind, remain still and the intellect is not active, that is known as the highest state.” Probably the most famous definition, however, is given in Patañjali’s classic statement *yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ*, which is translated in the epigraph above and probably dates back to the second century BCE.

Let us now take a brief look at the psychometrics of pure awareness as compared to other approaches—and keep an eye on its various methodological limitations. Figure 2.1 gives a list of the ninety-two descriptive questions that participants answered, as well as six different factor solutions showing the number of extracted factors used to explore different interpretations of our data. If you look for the blue dots, you’ll find factor 2, which we named “Peace, Bliss, and Silence.” You can see that it was remarkably stable across different factor solutions.

Reading the experiential reports in the first part of this chapter, you will immediately have noted a strong overlap with other phenomenological elements (e.g., with a feeling of “weightlessness” or a sense of “clarity”). Therefore, many of these reports could have been included in other chapters of this book (e.g., in chapters 5 and 24). This shows one difference between statistical analysis and qualitative assessment. Figure 2.1 is based on mathematical relations between single questionnaire items in a psychometric study. By contrast, my selection of passages from experiential descriptions given by meditators reflects a qualitative evaluation of explicit verbal reports. This evaluation is not grounded in statistical analysis but is in some ways much richer and touches on many aspects at the same time. Statistical analysis and qualitative assessment are two very different ways of approaching pure awareness, of trying to get closer to the elephant. For example, in figure 2.1, a color like dark blue represents membership in a specific factor, relative to a certain mathematical solution. This solution was chosen as optimal under joint conceptual and statistical considerations, but it had only limited explanatory power. Future studies, therefore, may come to better and perhaps very different results.

My own way of grouping together experiential reports, on the other hand, reflects what I intuitively took to be the most relevant or dominant phenomenological features. This approach is very different, and it has a correspondingly different set of serious limitations and weaknesses. First, as this is not an academic monograph, but a book trying to communicate some important results to a wider audience, my qualitative evaluation is not a truly *systematic* qualitative analysis at all. It reflects the implicit phenomenological intuitions of someone who has meditated twice a day for more than forty-seven years, and who has also worked as a researcher in philosophy and cognitive



Figure 2.1

Statistical analysis of the MPE-92M questionnaire into factors. Questionnaire items are listed on the vertical axis. The columns show how the items can be grouped into an increasing number of factors. The first column, for example, shows the result of forming the items into six groups, or factors. The last column shows our preferred way of grouping, using twelve factors (the number of factors is shown on the horizontal axis). Each grouping into a given number of factors is called a “factor solution.” The colors represent the various factors, and the size of the circles indicates how strongly a given item is related to its factor. Open circles indicate a negative relationship between an item and its factor. Please note that, although an attempt was made to identify the same factors across all the factor solutions by coloring them, “sameness” here is not objectively definable; the best we can do is an operationalized definition of the degree of prototypicality.

science for some four decades of his life. Clearly, this introduces a lot of noise into the signal, and it inevitably will have led to distortions and biases that I am completely unaware of. Second, not all our participants gave an additional written report. Distortions may have arisen from the fact that only some individuals selected themselves into the current group, yielding a biased sample for phenomenological analysis. Generally, qualitative analysis is more subjective than statistical analysis. Its results cannot really be tested for significance or extended to a wider population, and they are usually not systematically replicable. Finally, my own qualitative data analysis is necessarily based on a classification of reports according to certain phenomenal properties and attributes describable in natural language, whereas quantitative analysis classifies data based on computable values. This is another important difference.

You may recall from the introduction that a third way to approach the phenomenology of pure awareness is to look at canonical texts. These can show us how the elephant has been described over the centuries, for example by philosophers, spiritual teachers, and scholar-practitioners in the East and the West. This involves a *semantic* level of analysis, as opposed to a statistical or qualitative evaluation of reports about minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) states. In its fullest form, such a method would assess as exhaustively as possible the meaning of those concepts and theories that have been used to describe pure awareness, in many cultures and often in a prescientific context, and drawing on both quantitative and qualitative methods. I have done it the old-fashioned, brain-based way here, with no pretensions to comprehensive coverage. But just as with the experiential reports describing pure awareness, hopefully others will go down the data-based route in future research projects.

When I conducted a semantic investigation of canonical texts, I found six semantic constraints, which I used to narrow down the meaning of “pure awareness” and define a first working concept of MPE.² As we saw earlier in this chapter, the experience of peace can be interpreted as a low degree of mental conflict and perturbation. This observation is interestingly connected to the second of the six semantic constraints that I found in my investigation. Based on an extensive review of the literature, this constraint was termed “Low Complexity.”³ Generally, pure consciousness is often described as the complete absence of intentional content, in particular of high-level symbolic mental content (i.e., discursive, conceptual, or propositional thought), but sometimes even as the disappearance of all sensorimotor, interoceptive, and affective content. Pure consciousness is a thoughtless state, but in deeper, fully absorbed stages of meditation, all perception of the environment and all sensory awareness of the body from the inside, including sensations and emotions, may also disappear. If we look at the relevant literature, one striking discovery is how many phenomenological characterizations of MPE

episodes are exclusively negative (in the sense of negation-filled, saying what they are *not*). Traditionally, pure awareness is described as follows:

- **Nonsensory:** MPE itself instantiates no perceptual qualities; it is not a form of sensory experience.
- **“No-thingness”:** Absence of the phenomenal property of “objecthood”; no subjective experience involving reification, such as of distinct multimodal objects as integrated from different sensory features and as segmented from a background or perceptual scene; importantly, also lacking boundaries, substantiality, and objecthood.
- **Nonmotor:** Absolute stillness, no motion in space.
- **Atemporal:** Absence of temporal experience, no motion in time.
- **Noncognitive:** Nonsymbolic and nonconceptual; no discursive thinking, mental imagery, or mind-wandering; no movement in mind.
- **Nonegoic:** No self-location in time, no self-location in space, no quality of ownership, agency, or goal-directed control (either mental or bodily).
- **Unbounded:** No second, finite region to which attention could be directed, and no consciously experienced boundaries, limits, or horizon.
- **Aperspectival:** No “actively knowing self,” no consciously experienced model of an epistemic agent as directed at objects of knowledge, and no passive personal-level self-as-subject either.

Because it is so full of negations, pure awareness is often conceptualized as an entirely contentless form of conscious experience. However, this is a controversial issue because there could well be a global form of experiential content that is so subtle or abstract that, in the absence of the right cultural context and lacking suitable conceptual tools, it would be only natural to describe it as mere nihilistic emptiness or as something that doesn’t really exist—or even as something that exists beyond the distinction between existence and nonexistence, always already preceding it. What we can agree on is that episodes of pure awareness are described as lacking any *complex* content, that they are extremely simple—for example, because the phenomenal character of awareness per se lacks internal structure and temporal dynamics. This is what “Low Complexity” means. But then “Low Complexity” also means a low degree of mental conflict and perturbation, and internal simplicity therefore may be directly related to the experience of peace.

Our best current theories of brain function understand it as involving a constant process of conflict resolution (known as “hierarchical Bayesian updating”).⁴ Representational content, including our conscious model of the world, is generated via continuous attempts to minimize prediction error on many levels. If this new theoretical vision

is heading in the right direction, then reducing the number of levels and reducing the “temporal thickness” that is created by constantly predicting outcomes in a more distant future will automatically minimize internal conflict, simply by flattening the predictive hierarchy.⁵ The phenomenological hypothesis following from such a flattening would be a conscious experience of gradually “returning to the present moment,” eventually leading to an experience of “timelessness” and a complete absence of consciously experienced conflict. You may know that one of the classical concepts for the experience of pure awareness is *samādhi*, referring to a peaceful state of complete, thoughtless equilibrium: the eighth and final level identified in the *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, as well as the last of the eight elements of the Noble Eightfold Path in Buddhism. Interestingly, the ancient notion of *samādhi* already contains not only the semantic element of peaceful equanimity but also the idea of flattening a more complex internal state, an inner landscape: It is often translated as “even intellect.”

Back to our psychometric study. Aside from the limits of any given analytical method applied to its data, it has a number of inherent design limitations too, of course. Most fundamentally, there is no guarantee that participants understood the instructions and the concept of “pure awareness” introduced therein in the way we intended (e.g., 3 percent said right at the outset that they didn’t know what the term meant). Varying understandings will lead to unwanted variation in the responses. More generally, differences in participants’ understanding of *any* part of the survey, including both the items themselves and the demographic questions, could have led to undesired response variability. Such differences can occur for a variety of reasons. First, participants will typically have been exposed to different background information about meditation. If they have actively engaged with the relevant literature, there may be large differences in what they selected for study. For instance, many of our participants (77 percent) were regular practitioners who had sustained their discipline over years. Their practice and the motivation behind it may be tied to an individual project of meaning-making (more on this in chapter 17). It is plausible to assume that this may often be anchored in adherence to specific belief systems and the conceptual framework of a certain lineage, spiritual tradition, organization, or teacher. The terminology employed by such theories, as well as their epistemological and metaphysical background assumptions, may “contaminate” survey responses. This can happen on many levels, not only cognitively but also in relation to embodied action.

Respondents’ implicit assumptions about their own inner experience, therefore, may have played out not only with respect to intellectual understanding and verbal expression (e.g., biased memory recall or the actual wording of phenomenological reports) but also via effects on motor control (to answer each item, respondents had to

use a computer mouse to position a slider on a horizontal line ranging from 0 to 100, where the position on the line indicated the degree of agreement with the item). For beings like us, belief systems and theories act as unconscious priors, contaminating what we think and say and do by directly shaping the low-level information flow in our brains. Thus, theory contamination is always *embodied* theory contamination. I will say more about the methodological problem of “theory contamination” in chapter 17 and at other points as we go along. For the special case of research on pure awareness, this problem may be particularly severe.

We know from correspondence with potential participants during the pilot phase that such belief systems can even lead some people not to participate in scientific projects at all. Some of them will reject any scientific attempt to approximate something that they consider to be as fundamentally ineffable and soteriologically crucial as pure awareness, perhaps out of a fear of disenchantment (see chapter 17). Many of the traditional frameworks not only provide a conceptual system of phenomenological descriptions but also present us with a normative phenomenology: They explicitly tell us how a practitioner’s progress should unfold, how the different “stages” of meditation *should* look. This is not to say that ancient theories of pure awareness—based on literally millions of hours spent in silent meditation by serious scholar-practitioners who came before us—do not have great value. But it also shows why a fresh, bottom-up approach in a new and globalized historical context has its own value—because it helps to weaken the omnipresent influence of theory contamination. Please also note that the specific belief systems many meditators adhere to are not only related to certain lineages or teachers but quite often include an explicit *metaphysics* of consciousness, a pre-given assumption about what conscious awareness really is.⁶ In sum, theory contamination may have both introduced a self-selection bias into our sample and biased the questionnaire responses from those who did respond.

Even assuming a singular, precise, and unequivocal understanding of the concept of pure awareness, it is still possible that some responses were driven largely by a desire to report particularly impressive or personally meaningful experiences rather than to adhere as closely as possible to the instructions. There is some evidence for this in the 1,183 written phenomenological reports presented in this book, where a number of participants chose to report not ordinary MPE as it may occur during formal meditation practice and full-absorption episodes, but rarer, often quite dramatic, nondual states in which all subject/object structure had spontaneously disappeared. This may have been different for the overall cohort of 1,403 participants, had they all provided reports. As it was, the effect may have been an indirect consequence of us asking participants for a description of an experience “in which the quality of pure awareness was particularly

salient and/or one which you can remember particularly clearly.” What can be remembered particularly clearly might often be the most striking or impressive states, which may not necessarily be the most paradigmatic instances of “pure awareness.”

A related issue is what could be called “response drift”: Some participants may have started with a somewhat vague idea of the target state of pure awareness, which became increasingly focused as they moved through the questionnaire. Conversely, they may have started out with a very specific concept, perhaps dictated by commitment to a particular theory, and then shifted away from it as they moved through the questions. Responses given earlier, therefore, might relate to a somewhat different target than the later responses discuss.⁷

In studies of private subjective experiences, there is a general problem with verbal report—namely, ineffability, the difficulty or even impossibility of expressing certain phenomenal states or qualities in words. This problem may be particularly pronounced when it comes to MPE, given that the experiential quality of “pure awareness” has long been regarded by meditators as the paradigmatic example of ineffability. However, it may arise for several more specific reasons. One is a lack of concurrent reportability during full-absorption episodes.⁸ Thanks to the nondual nature of such states (i.e., the lack of any phenomenally represented subject/object structure; see chapter 27), there will by definition be no intention or cognitive capacity to verbally report, mentally categorize, or actively memorize the phenomenal character in question. Another reason may be that MPE’s timeless content is unlike⁹ any of the more familiar sensory, motor, and interoceptive qualities that we experience every day, which makes it hard to grasp verbally by comparing it to such qualities. A final reason is that the experience of MPE seems to lack any internal structure or “grain.” It seems uniformly dense. This phenomenal quality of “ultrasmoothness,”¹⁰ as it has been called in the philosophical literature, may also hinder verbal report by depriving it of any discernible entry points for description or functional analysis.

Beyond the matter of verbal expressibility, another issue faced by all studies based on retrospective self-report is the unreliability of memory recall. Human autobiographical memory is notoriously fallible, including for the recall of previous mental states.¹¹ In our study, we were asking participants to report on experiences that occurred in their past, possibly even decades ago. Memory retrieval for such events will inevitably be biased, depending on various factors such as the amount of time that has passed, current attitudes to that past period, and so on. The uncertainty introduced by such errors may be substantial but is likely to remain unavoidable in studies of this kind. One could probably greatly mitigate the memory issue by asking meditators to provide reports immediately after a meditation session (e.g., toward the end of a silent retreat).

Other generic weaknesses of our anonymized online survey approach are that the identities of participants could not be verified and we were unable to detect fraudulent responses or multiple responses by the same person. As part of privacy protection, IP addresses were not stored and therefore could not be used for data plausibility checks.

On a conceptual level, there is an even deeper variant of the memory retrieval problem. The concept of “autobiographical memory” refers to the representation of events that at the time when they occurred were phenomenally represented as being experienced by a conscious *self*. If they weren’t, they would not really be *autobiographical* memories, memories about your *own* life. This means that the respondents’ claims that *they themselves* consciously experienced a selfless state at the very time when it actually occurred are highly dubious from a methodological perspective. Are retrospective reports of selfless conscious states trustworthy; can scientists take them at face value? One might think that a person can accurately recall and report a past conscious experience as an experience that *she herself* underwent only if she was self-conscious when it happened. Perhaps such experiential reports contain a sort of logical error (individuals can’t have been present as self-conscious entities, but think they were) or something resembling a performative fallacy like “I do not exist!” (individuals can’t have been present, but the very speech act creates an obvious contradiction).¹² To be sure, selfless conscious states very likely can and do occur—but who really *has* these states? The universe?

There is an epistemological problem here (How do we really *know* what actually happened?), as well as a phenomenological one (What was the actual structure of conscious *experience* at the time?). Again, the memories involved could not be autobiographical in the strong phenomenological sense of referring to *someone’s* experiences at the time at which they occurred. Of course, it may be empirically possible that selfless states are stored and later retrieved in an autobiographical format, as a post hoc mnemonic misrepresentation adding in the feature of egoic self-awareness—a case of misremembering, and not of confabulation.¹³ The state itself was selfless, while the conscious memory of it wasn’t, but the memory manages to make it appear *as if* it actually had been a self-state or a person-state, retrospectively endowing or “coloring” it with the experiential quality of ownership. But while it occurred, it was an ownerless organism-state. As an aside, please note that my point about post hoc mnemonic misrepresentations could in principle hold for *all* self-conscious experience, but in a much smaller time window: Maybe all experiences are originally selfless and only swiftly integrated into an automatic self-model after they arise. We could call this generalized version the thesis of “selfhood via nested time-scales,” and I have defended it elsewhere.¹⁴ But the specific philosophical question about MPE and autobiographical memory remains open, and its implications are profound.

Finally, our data are highly unlikely to be representative of the global population of meditators. The online nature of the questionnaire and its distribution channels, as well as self-selection effects, will have produced a sample that deviates in several respects (known and unknown) from the global population. However, representativeness is not a major concern at this stage. Future versions of our questionnaire will be put to the test against various populations, and its factor structure will be improved. If necessary, different variants of the questionnaire can be adapted to different populations and modified to provide a factor structure that holds up in as many settings as possible. Methods from confirmatory factor analysis can then be used to quantify the differences in item functioning and response patterns among different groups of participants. What is most important is to finally make a fresh start, get the process going, and take the phenomenology of pure consciousness seriously—from many different angles at the same time. Daniel Dennett has called this approach “heterophenomenology,” and it involves a departure from the Cartesian idea of absolute “first-person authority,” not taking the reports as authoritative beyond the seeming itself—which, again, we must carefully take as seriously as we can while allowing the possibility that, at any time, we might be wrong about the contents of our own mind.¹⁵ Many different angles allow for surprises and unexpected discoveries. A dimensional approach is only one of these angles, while the perspective of qualitative analysis, as gradually developed in the following chapters, will quite naturally make us see different focal points and general themes.

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/15196.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/15196.001.0001)

The Elephant and the Blind

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Science, and 500+ Experiential Reports

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Citation:

*The Elephant and the Blind: The Experience of Pure Consciousness: Philosophy,
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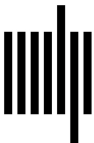
DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/15196.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262377287

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2024

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding
and support from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

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The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Stone Serif and Stone Sans by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Metzinger, Thomas, 1958– author.

Title: The elephant and the blind : the experience of pure consciousness: philosophy, science, and 500+ experiential reports / Thomas Metzinger.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2024] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023012135 (print) | LCCN 2023012136 (ebook) | ISBN 9780262547109 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262377294 (epub) | ISBN 9780262377287 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Consciousness.

Classification: LCC BF311 .M4725 2024 (print) | LCC BF311 (ebook) | DDC 153—dc23/eng/20230830

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023012135>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023012136>