

3 Silence

A space of timeless, self-luminous, world-penetrating silence. [. . .] The silence is not acoustic, the space is not physical. [. . .] The whole world was completely simple, logical, and clear, embedded in this luminous fragrant sweet silence. [. . .] . . . delicious silence. [#1381]

The experience of silence and mental stillness are core aspects of pure awareness. Novice meditators often first notice silence and stillness as what one of our participants called “the blanking interval between two thoughts” (#240). However, as the practitioner soon begins to discover, the silence of pure awareness is not simply an absence of internal and external noise or a mere cessation of thought, nor is it a nihilistic form of nothingness. The silence of pure consciousness is not a dead silence. For example, it can have a subtle, dynamic quality like “the feeling of plunging into a calm lake, being completely still, while simultaneously flowing along with it” (#2907). It is also not an emotional experience, but it can be characterized by a positive yet very subtle affective tone, giving rise to metaphorical descriptions of silent delight like “deliciousness,” “sweetness,” “shine,” or “fragrance” (as presented at the beginning of this chapter, in #1381).

Our meditators found or created a striking number of literal and figurative turns of phrase in their attempt to capture the special phenomenal character of silence during episodes of pure awareness. For example, they described it as a “feeling of soundlessness” (#3259) and as the “feeling of a silence that rests in itself” (#2900). One respondent compared the experiential quality of abiding in the stillness of awareness itself to “letting the silence speak for itself” (#3440), while another described it as “a huge, boundless, absolutely silent space, which however, has a circular shape. It is so quiet that it’s already loud again” (#3026). Others evoked the silence in terms of nonhuman sensory experience (“Hearing with bat’s ears” [#1541]) and via the paradox of “hearing silence”: “The silence is ‘audible’ inside my head but without ears, like a splashing noise, like the spray after the sea wave has hit the beach and you can hear the

millionfold bursting of the foam bubbles—but evenly and endlessly, without pause or crescendo” (#1787). Great beauty and depth can be found in the specific phenomenology of silence that comes with meditation practice, and many finely nuanced aspects can be discovered in its subtlety. One of our participants said, “There is a sense of security in it and a sweet, silent calm [. . .], a fullness, a being-satiated, a being-allowed-to-be” (#2511).

Here are some pure awareness reports in which the phenomenal quality of “silence” is a dominant feature:

2049 Neutral state in attentive silence. Either deep in thought or in an absolutely neutral space without thoughts or activities. [. . .]

2628 Overriding factor is a deep and ineffable stillness; this occurs frequently in meditation on breath as the breath becomes more and more subtle and disappears and is accompanied by a subtle sense of naturally arising bliss. [. . .]

2706 They are experiences of deep silence, absolute alertness, without contents, deep connectedness and contentment, right up to experiences that contain only an “echo” or “reverberation” of what must have been there. [. . .]

2983 An experience of falling, first wanting to hold on to something, then letting go, letting go more and more . . . Deep silence . . . The feeling of being a “spark in the universe” . . . At some point, letting go of that spark, too. Deep silence . . . Deepest darkness, shining, widest space, spaceless, timeless . . . Incomprehensible silence despite speech and conversation . . . [. . .]

3035 I once had the feeling of silence while meditating. I had no thoughts, only inner calm. I became aware of my breathing without wanting to draw my attention to it. A feeling of absolute thoughtlessness.

3380 I experienced deep silence.

3218 [. . .] A few years ago, a very deep, central, and silent part of my brain suddenly became activated, as if somebody flipped a switch and a heretofore unused part of my machinery came online and has since been available to me. This part is like a ball of silence inside my physiology and has become a constant companion, sometimes more prominent, sometimes—when my mind is more excited—slightly less prominent. The experience of a thought in meditation is sometimes like a drop of water falling onto a very quiet surface of water and creating ripples. [. . .]

3330 I could describe my experiences best with concepts like stopping time, perceiving space without time, no thoughts, absolute calm, total satisfaction, wanting nothing, being awake, expansion—absolute silence, neither nothing nor something, no evaluation! [. . .]

3439 [. . .] After minutes of thought storm, absolute calm sets in: No thought waves, no physical sensation, breathing is calm and slow. I am absolutely focused on the silence and can carry it.

3472 In a completely everyday situation an experience of timelessness, motionlessness, silence, and wholeness. Standing face to face with someone, no longer being able to distinguish whose eyes I am looking into, mine or the eyes of the person in front of me. While meditating, more and more contact with the cushion and then an increasing weakening of the feeling of my body in connection with a deep calm and silence.

3601 [. . .] Deep peace and silence. A connection to source itself. Bliss.

Deep silence also is a prime example of the *nonconceptuality* of awareness itself (see chapter 9 on the experience of “suchness”).¹ Phenomenologically, deep silence is the uncontracted quality of silent knowing itself, empty cognizance lacking any form of grasping or inner agency. Prototypical minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) is not only nonconceptual; it is also characterized by a principle of mental inaction. It never reacts, it never makes a choice, and it never initiates an action. As one participant put it, pure awareness is “that which never speaks” (see chapter 30). Pure awareness is that which would not even say, “I am that which never speaks.” That which says “I am that which never speaks” is something else.

As I explained in the introduction, what I mean by “experiencing consciousness *as such*” is not that we perform some sort of mental act in which we finally grasp its conceptual essence, forming a thought about consciousness *as* consciousness. Pure awareness is not pure awareness plus the thought, “Ah! Now my mind is entirely silent!” On the contrary, it seems clear that even a simpler animal, a conscious creature that has no linguistic capacities at all and cannot think thoughts in the sense of “conceptually representing” the world or its own mind, could undergo a pure-awareness experience. It seems logically possible that there might be biological or even artificial systems for which the pure-awareness experience is a much more dominant feature than it is for us. There might be conscious systems that nevertheless have no conceptual or even theoretical understanding of the fact that they are conscious, or of the sheer, current existence of awareness *per se*—systems that do not strive for such an understanding and that, accordingly, never could or would report it using a language like ours. In sum, MPE is an entirely silent and *nonconceptual* experience of the phenomenal character of awareness itself. We will return to this point many times, and from different angles, in chapters 9, 14, 16, 20, 30, and 32.

1196 It feels as if “silence” was an experience. In the beginning of the experience, my mind still wanted to classify it and describe it to itself, and relate it

to the Buddhist teachings I have received. But since it is very nonconceptual, my mind “gave up” trying to grasp the experience and instead surrendered to it and just let it happen. There was also an element of fear, because it feels quite groundless, and that is not something we intuitively like to experience. I think often it is that subtle (or sometimes not so subtle) fear of this emptiness that prevents me from fully committing to these experiences, and rather trying to conceptualize them. Another aspect is the fact that in Buddhism it is described as something great to happen to you, so in the beginning of the experience there are also thoughts of positive judgment, and a want to maintain the experience and not let it go. But the experience itself in my opinion is best described by the term “nonconceptual.”

Stillness and the Zero-Person Perspective

It is as if the wind had suddenly stopped.

—Chinul (1158–1210), *Excerpts from the Dharma Collection*

The Australian meditation researcher Toby Woods conducted a very careful and rigorous study of the experience of silence in three forms of meditation practice.² He and his colleagues Olivia Carter and Jennifer Windt in Melbourne used objective criteria to select a sample of 135 expert texts from the traditions of Shamatha, Transcendental, and Stillness Meditation, and used these to create a database of descriptions detailing the meditation techniques as well as correlated subjective experiences. The material in the database was compiled and systematically analyzed using a rigorous method known as “evidence synthesis.” As it turns out, the phenomenology of silence and quietness is constituted largely by the absence of thoughts, other mental activity, and sounds, and therefore it can be described as an absence both of internal and external “noise” and of disturbance in general. According to this large body of expert texts, the experience of silence and quietness has a particular connection with stillness (as it happens, the German word *Stille* denotes both) and is a major phenomenological feature of what Woods and colleagues term “contentless experience.”³ This feature is most pronounced during full-absorption episodes of pure consciousness. The findings also dovetail with what was said in the preceding chapters about mental perturbation, the low-complexity constraint, and the experience of peace.

Woods and colleagues found that the phenomenology of silence and quietness is frequently presented alongside the phenomenal qualities of luminosity, bliss/joy, ease, and peace. It is remarkable that quite naturally and independently, even though I only

found out about their project later, each of these phenomenal characteristics turned out to have a chapter of its own in this book. A second finding from Australia was that experts often use folk-phenomenological terms like “silence” without defining them—as a matter of fact, a strength of Woods and colleagues’ study is that it uncovered a phenomenological slippage between “silence” and “stillness.” As we will see in the course of our journey, there is a possibility that expert texts, as well as testimonial reports, may be contaminated by their authors’ belief system or background theory.

Third, there is a specific connection between silence and the absence of conceptual thought or intellectual activity (you may recall “even intellect” as one marker of MPE in chapter 2), but the experience of silence also naturally extends to an absence of other forms of disturbance including sensory experience.⁴ It is a global feature. Woods et al. write: “The fourth finding is that the silence/quietness is reported as being in some sense complete. Terms such as sheer, deep, absolute, pure, and all-encompassing are used.”⁵

Is pure awareness “contentless experience”? If so, a theory of MPE could simply be one of contentless, restful alertness—a silent form of phenomenal experience that in its purest form does not instantiate any intentional properties (in a philosophical sense). On such a theory, MPE would have no content because it is not directed at anything beyond itself. At this point, let me begin to draw your attention to one specific possibility: The absence of all empirical content could itself be an appearance, and what subjects (mistakenly) describe as a “contentless” phenomenal state could actually carry an *abstract* form of representational content. In other words, there might be a very special form of conscious content that can actually *account* for reports about the experience of contentlessness.⁶

Could there be phenomenal experiences that are hard to notice because they do not resemble any other experiences? In 1974, Thomas Nagel published an article, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” that has become one of the best-known discussions of consciousness and why it may be irreducible, forever beyond the reach of science. It has become an item of public folklore outside of academic philosophy. When neuroscientists want to write about consciousness but, in their introductory paragraph, begin to notice that they lack a definition of what it actually is they would like to explain, they often resort to Nagel’s idea that if some entity—like a laboratory animal or human being used as an experimental subject—is conscious, then it must be *like* something to be this entity. To this day, the idea seems highly intuitive to many—“Yes, it is *like* something to be conscious!”—but the more we think about it, the more we find that we don’t really know what this mysterious “what it is like” really refers to.

From 1998 to 1999, I spent a wonderful year at the philosophy department at the University of California, San Diego, writing my book *Being No One*. Sometimes I went

to lunch at the faculty club with a beautiful and slightly rude old man by the name of Francis Crick. I like rude old men who really lay it on the line. As everybody knows, Francis Crick (1916–2004) made a central contribution to revealing the helical structure of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA); together with James Watson and Maurice Wilkins, he was jointly awarded the 1962 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. (Rosalind Franklin should also have been acknowledged in her lifetime for the experimental work she did with Wilkins that contributed to generating the double-helix model, because she was actually “an equal member of a quartet who solved the double helix.”⁷) Now that the problem of life was basically solved, he wanted to crack the problem of consciousness—and he didn’t think highly of philosophers at all.

“Listen, Thomas,” he said, “you guys have had more than two millennia to solve this problem, you’ve made a mess of it, and you have a really bad track record. If you want to make a contribution as a philosopher, it would be best if you simply shut up. Consciousness is not a philosophical problem anymore, but a neuroscientific one, and we are going to crack it within the next two decades.”

“That would be fine, Francis, I am all for it—after all, this is why, five years ago, we founded the Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness!” I replied. “But tell me one thing: *What* exactly is it that you would like to explain?”

Francis thought that everybody knows what consciousness is—it is what you lose under anaesthesia and when you go to bed at night, and what you regain after waking up again. But of course, things aren’t that simple. There can be conscious experience in the dream state, and even during dreamless deep sleep (see chapter 20), for example, and some anesthetics might work only by causing amnesia, blocking memory access to what may really have been a kind of twilight state. Philosophers have long seen that—from a theory-of-science perspective—it doesn’t help to launch major research programs and make a lot of noise when the “*explanandum*” (that which is to be explained by a future theory of consciousness) isn’t clear. This is a problem that still pervades all the neuroscience of consciousness today, in all the methodologies and competing models.⁸ In a way, this is one of the goals of this book: I hope that combining the minimal model approach with phenomenological data will, by the end of our journey, give us a clearer picture of what really needs to be explained.

Back in the faculty club in 1999, we were now having dessert. I had just amicably asked my question for a second time. Francis mumbled something to the effect that, from a strategic perspective, it wasn’t a good idea to define one’s research targets too precisely too early on. “Agreed, Francis, we don’t want to get lost in a priori theorizing or ‘overfitting’ philosophical models, and we do also need a general heuristic and a practical research strategy,” I replied. And then I gently repeated my point for the third

time: “But what *is* it that you want to explain?” This was when the famous Nobel laureate finally exploded—and Patti Churchland wasn’t there to protect me.

We simply don’t know what this mysterious idea of “what it is like” really refers to. To be sure, the bat’s brain may instantiate unknown phenomenal properties (some philosophers call them “qualia”), and these could be beyond the reach of science and impossible for the human brain to emulate. We just do not know what it really feels like to navigate and forage by echolocation, emitting high-frequency sound pulses through our mouth or nose while listening to the echo. But could there be an abstract, much more generic experiential quality that we share with the bat’s conscious model of reality? If one believes in the existence of “qualia” (I don’t, because it is another successful folkloristic meme, and almost nobody knows what it originally meant),⁹ this raises an interesting new possibility for posing the central question of this book in a new way: Perhaps MPE is the “C-qualia” (the generic “consciousness quale”) that all sentient creatures share?

Thomas Nagel was making a different point. There may be not only unknown and unknowable properties in bat consciousness, but also an irreducible *individual*—namely, the bat’s “self,” from which its inward perspective ultimately originates. The existence of this self would make the bat’s experience irrevocably *subjective*, and therefore beyond the reach of objective science (more about this in chapter 29). For us, this point is highly relevant. What if pure awareness were a state of consciousness that did not really *resemble* anything (e.g., because it consisted of only the most abstract, generic phenomenal quality), and that was not *subjective* either, because as a stand-alone phenomenon, it was always nondual, not tied to an experiencing self? What if the simplest, minimal form of consciousness were aperspectival?

In 1974, Nagel said this: “But fundamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is to *be* that organism—something it is like *for* the organism.”¹⁰ This is what everyone remembers. But in footnote 6, he also said: “[. . .] the analogical form of the English expression ‘what it is *like*’ is misleading. It does not mean ‘what (in our experience) it *resembles*,’ but rather ‘how it is for the subject himself.’” This footnote clears up a frequent misunderstanding of Nagel’s article. What he did *not* mean is that the philosophical problem of what consciousness is results primarily from the fact that a bat’s conscious experiences do not sufficiently resemble our own experiential states. Nagel was after something deeper—the problem of subjectivity itself, the “subjective character” of experience itself—and in chapter 4 of his 1986 book *The View from Nowhere*, the issue appeared again in a new form: as the irreducibility of individual first-person perspectives and the possible existence of an “objective self.” The problem of subjectivity is the problem of mapping the first-person perspective onto the third-person worldview of science.

Put differently, Nagel wanted to know how it is for the *bat* to be a bat—not how it would be for *us* to have similar, batlike states. This, Nagel thought, is beyond our ability to conceive. I think Nagel was right: To do this properly, we would have to fully identify with the content of the bat’s self-model, which would immediately make us forget all about who we thought we were before and what it was we were trying to conceive of—and even why we were doing this. As I have explained in my academic work, I believe that the deeper point is not about qualia, but about understanding the phenomenology of identification and what we are really trying to say whenever we use the mixed visuogrammatical metaphor of a “first-person perspective,” somewhat conspiratorially pretending that everybody knows exactly what we are talking about.¹¹

In the context of pure awareness, all this raises three interesting points. First, MPE too is clearly beyond our “ability to conceive” because it is a nonconceptual awareness of awareness itself. It *cannot* be imagined because silence cannot be expressed as noise. MPE is not pure awareness *plus* the recognition, “Ah, now I have returned to complete stillness again! So, *this* is what awareness itself feels like . . .” Just as in the thought experiment about being a bat, fully dissolving into it would make us forget all about who we thought we were before. We would move from meditation into nonmeditation (see chapter 32).

Second, Thomas Nagel’s antireductionist arguments about the irreducibility of subjectivity and the putative existence of nonphysical “first-person facts” do not apply to MPE. Focusing on the problem of subjectivity actually *detracts* from a deeper understanding of consciousness, and adopting the minimal model approach dissolves the problem of subjectivity for the science of consciousness, helping us understand that the “first-person perspective” really is a surface phenomenon. As we will see in the course of this book, pure awareness itself is neither a first-person nor a third-person state because it is the prime example of an epistemic “zero-person perspective.” Pure awareness is based on a form of knowing that is itself nondual, nonegoic, and therefore aperspectival in Nagel’s sense. I believe that this conscious form of knowing could be an *organismic* state, but while it occurs, it is not a person-state and is not owned by any person because the process of egoic self-modeling that creates personal-level ownership has been suspended. *You* cannot be directly acquainted with it, but maybe the biological organism can. (Nagel himself saw this possibility in 1969, in one of his earlier, lesser-known writings entitled “The Boundaries of Inner Space,” when he said: “Perhaps we shall have to fall back on the idea of an organism or an organic system.”)¹² Therefore, all philosophical arguments that consciousness is irreducibly subjective—we could call them “antinaturalist arguments from subjectivity”—may fail on the most fundamental level, simply because MPE is not a “subjective” phenomenon at all, either

phenomenologically or in any strong epistemological sense. It is a subpersonal state. While it occurs, it is not tied to an individual, personal-level perspective. To be sure, there is an epistemic subject in a much weaker, abstract sense—but what undergoes this subpersonal state of knowing is a biological organism, not an ego or a person. In this book, we will try to focus on the actual phenomenal experience itself, but it is already starting to become clear that some of the core discoveries that we are making have important *epistemological* implications.

So the first new insight relating to Nagel's work was that pure awareness is something that cannot be successfully grasped or simulated by the imagination. This is impossible because it would create a subtle sense of effort and the experience of mental agency. The second insight was that MPE itself is not a first-person state, but a zero-person state. Maybe an organism can get acquainted with or "used to" it, but a personal-level self cannot. Third, an interesting possibility now appears on the horizon: People may have had difficulty taking pure awareness seriously because, in some fundamental but yet-to-be-understood sense, it really is not *like* other states of consciousness; it only resembles them in the very weak sense of being something conscious.

A mathematical analogy for this aspect of pure awareness could be based on the notion of an empty set, which is a subset of all other sets but resembles none of them. The empty set would be unconscious. However, the set containing only the empty set resembles all other sets in at least one aspect: This would be a full absorption episode of pure awareness. If you think of a set as being like a box, the empty set is a box with nothing in it; the set containing the empty set is a box with another empty box inside it. It has an *abstract* kind of content because a box is not nothing, even if it is empty. All analogies have limitations, but, in addition to abstractness, this one would also give us simplicity plus a very weak, barely noticeable kind of resemblance to other sets.¹³

In chapter 5, I will explain the idea that pure awareness could be a model of an empty and unobstructed space of knowing, and that experiencing pure awareness simply means having a *model* of this wide and open space. The space itself is something unconscious (like the empty set), but conscious experience is exactly what appears when the space is transformed into a *self-modeling* space (i.e., a box with another empty box inside it, but this time "self-knowingly" so). I think that in the future, it may become important to think about pure awareness on a mathematical, purely formal level.¹⁴ However, I believe that in the end, all this may only bring us back to the fable of the blind people and the elephant. Conceptual boxology doesn't really work, for example because a considerable number of our phenomenological reports describe MPE as something that has no boundaries at all, and simultaneously as something that (in an

unclear sense of “containing”) contains all other conscious states. I may be wrong, but I think boxes like these—containers without walls—simply do not exist.

From a different perspective, here is how the philosopher Jonathan Shear approaches this difficult point:

Experience of the deepest level, that of pure consciousness awake to its own nature in and by itself, is generally held to be especially important. The defining characteristic of this experience is the *complete absence* of all sounds, tastes, thoughts, feelings, images, and anything else that one can ever imagine. Techniques for achieving this experience differ. [. . .] But they have in common the idea that it is possible for all empirical content to disappear, while one nevertheless remains awake.

What then is the experience like? By all accounts it is not *like* anything. One can have it and remember it—one knows that one was not asleep. But one does not remember it *as* anything at all. It is just *itself*—unimaginable and indescribable. The experience itself is extraordinarily abstract. Indeed, it is the logical ultimate of abstraction, since by all accounts it is what remains after everything that can possibly be removed from experience has been removed, while one nevertheless remains awake.

It should be noted, however, that even if the natural response to this experience is to describe it as “contentless,” it is still appropriate to raise the question of whether it is in fact completely contentless. For while experiences [. . .] might be so subtle and abstract that they naturally seem to be completely contentless, they might nevertheless actually have some, albeit very abstract, content.¹⁵

From the next chapter onward, I will gradually begin to introduce candidates for what the “contentless content” of pure awareness could actually be. The first will be the abstract quality of “epistemic openness” that comes with the experience of existential ease, peace, and silence.

The American composer, artist, and music theorist John Cage (1912–1992) wrote about a sudden philosophical insight that he had in the late 1940s during an experiment in the anechoic chamber at Harvard University. He described it like this: “[S]ilence is not acoustic. It is a change of mind, a turning around.”¹⁶ Philosophers and artists have ignored the phenomenology of silence for too long, and finally giving it serious attention raises many interesting questions. Can there be a kind of music that brings the silence between two sounds into the foreground? What exactly is common to all kinds of music that makes silence, the space between two notes, audible? More generally, are there forms of art that are able to “stage” MPE, to “orchestrate” the silence of pure awareness itself? Could there be an aesthetics of acoustic emptiness? And on the mental level—in the mind of the meditator—are there ways to actively imagine a

sound and then let it go? Are there what today's computational modelers might call mental "action policies":¹⁷ paths into nonaction that will reliably create the experience of silence? This would be entirely different from mentally simulating a speech act, for example by merely saying a mantra in your mind, and more like gently striking a "mental bell" one single time and then following the fading sound into silence; more like quietly observing an autumn leaf floating to the ground, or following the path of dandelion seeds that you have gently blown off a flower (compare #2867). Are there perhaps also special ways to *think thoughts* that make the space between those thoughts more and more vivid, gradually turning an absence into a presence? This way of thinking would be a form of mental art, a poetry of silence that no art school currently teaches. Could there be something like a scenography of pure consciousness, a new phenomenological discipline that applies to inner and outer scenes alike?

Clearly, many traditional forms of art have also been forms of contemplative practice. But it now begins to look as if meditation can itself be viewed as an art form. This art form would not be of the kind that implicitly assumes a Dennettian Cartesian theater, an inner scene that includes a little man in the head—an artist-homunculus that, mysteriously, is already conscious itself while it looks at the inner screen of pure awareness. Rather, this art form would aim at the effortless elegance that lies in using a groundless ground (chapter 26) as an inner stage environment—one that is crafted simply by revealing the centerless space of silence that has always already been there.

There is a difference, however, between experiencing the silent mind of an embodied self and experiencing the spontaneous arising of an uncontracted, spacious silence, the silence that can sometimes be felt to pervade all things. Silence sometimes allows a new quality of presence to emerge from what first appeared to be mere absence—it is almost as if the dynamic stillness of mindful attention were a form of "scenic lighting design," elevating the process of seeing itself into the space of visibility. But there are important nuances in the process. Previously, we saw that pure awareness itself is nondual, nonegoic, and therefore aperspectival in Thomas Nagel's sense. If you are a practitioner of meditation yourself, you may have discovered that there exist two subtly but profoundly different variations on the experience of silence: *experiencing* the quality of silence and *being* silence itself.

In my own practice, I have found that the transition cannot be constructed or fabricated in any way; unfortunately, there is absolutely nothing you can do to make it happen. But sometimes, unexpectedly, the difference can be discovered. Sometimes the moment of discovery turns into a form of mental noise that immediately terminates the silence that is about to disclose itself. Sometimes it doesn't. Have you already noticed this difference? You do not have to be a meditator to know this difference. Who or what is noticing it? Who or what lets go of the noticing?

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The Elephant and the Blind

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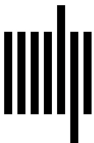
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