

4 Wakefulness

“Infinite simultaneity” and yet wide awake. [#2312]

One classic definition of pure awareness is “restful alertness.” There is a quality of relaxation and calm (see chapter 1), but also an element of nonagentive vigilance, of attentiveness without doing. We now turn to this element, the experience of being fully alert. Interestingly, modern science tells us that there is more than one kind of alertness. As I will explain in slightly greater detail in this discussion, neuroscientists use the term “tonic alertness” to describe that aspect of alertness that is sustained independently of external stimuli and not triggered by cues from the environment. This contrasts with what is called “phasic alertness,” which is caused by sudden events like a loud noise or salient and unexpected changes in brightness, contrast, and the like. A specific phenomenal quality goes along with the first variety—the subjective, conscious experience of cue-independent tonic alertness—and it has been largely ignored by the philosophy of mind and consciousness. From now on I will call this quality “wakefulness.”

In meditation, the phenomenal character of wakefulness can be much more dominant than it is in ordinary wake states. The experience of bare wakefulness itself is effortless, calm, and entirely nonconceptual. As always, let us begin by looking at some examples:

687 I am in a state of wakefulness. I have a strong awareness of the present moment. It is as if I am a guard dog: All my perceptions seem heightened. I am in consciousness but I am not doing anything except perceiving sounds, smells, sensations in my body. Time seems to be on hold.

3305 [. . .] During wholeness experiences during meditation [. . .] I find myself in a state of inner silence with simultaneously increased wakefulness. [. . .]

3218 [. . .] Full wakefulness is there, dullness is absent. It is an extremely peaceful and natural state. Complete innocence, completely resting in oneself and the

self flowing in the thoughts, the body, and the infinite. [. . .] Alertness to the extreme is an experience which I have frequently: No shred of dullness, knowing that wakefulness is the mover behind the quality of decisions of the intellect [. . .]. This alertness carries on into my meditation: complete self-referral, the mind completely settled, easy to focus inward and the settling of the ocean of the mind to complete waveless stillness with an occasional thought that is appropriate at the stage of my meditation. [. . .]

Let us now consider states in which wakefulness itself almost turns into a stand-alone feature, in which pure awareness arises out of or is identical with pure awakesness. In full-absorption states, there is no other content whatsoever—including knowledge about the meditator's personal identity or life history:

749 I “wake up” in a space-less, time-free space. I have no body and cannot perceive any objects. Thoughts hardly form, they cannot grasp anything. There is no memory. I know nothing about myself. I also have no conception of human, living being, life, world, etc. There is only awareness that I am. Nothing happens. I rest in this awareness and am one with it.

2603 [. . .] For me, the experience of pure awareness is a calm, impersonal, and blissful presence. It is very hard to describe “awareness” in itself without content or an object. I suppose it is like a sense, sight without vision, a simple way of acknowledging and noticing what is, or pure awakesness, the very basic feeling of consciousness being “on,” the fundamental constant that underlies all experience, which is always there. I can also be identified with this awareness and when I realize that this awareness is me, it is empowering. [. . .]

During a full-absorption episode, subjects are not functionally dissociated from their environment. They are not in a coma and not in dreamless deep sleep either; they remain open to the world. This is one interesting aspect of what the concept of “epistemic openness” refers to, which I will explain in greater detail later: The perception of environmental features is still possible. As a matter of fact, the experience of pure awareness can be understood as a representation of exactly this possibility: the currently existing capacity to know something, the potential to be open to the world. This is an abstract form of content. Although active perception doesn't take place, it can always be triggered by salient stimuli. In pure awareness, the organism has an inner model of its own epistemic openness; it nonconceptually knows about this openness (i.e., about “alertness being there”). But this does not yet imply that any other information processing is elevated to the level of conscious experience, nor that the knowing is of an egoic kind, that the known alertness is attributed to a knowing self. Yet, the

capacity to know in this way is clearly preserved, and as we will see in chapter 32, there can be interesting gradual transitions between nondual mindfulness and dual mindfulness, between nonmeditation and meditation:

3396 I experience pure awareness in moments (which are, if anything, probably short to very short, but which I can't temporally determine any more precisely), where I refrain from any form of mental activity in the strict sense of the word and also have no perceptions of a visual, acoustic, tactile, or olfactory nature. At the same time, however, I do not have the impression that I am no longer receptive to external perceptions. I don't have a strong feeling of peacefulness, happiness, detachment, so no high feelings like in intoxication or flow, rather the state can be described as "pleasant" or "liberated," maybe also as "resting in oneself."

859 [. . .] All thinking, feeling, perceiving had ceased, as if all processed software programs of my body-mind had been closed. First the sense of hearing returned with the perception of the singing bowl. Again it took a few minutes until I remembered how to think, how to walk. This experience was a bit frightening. In the following minutes I could not perceive/process any of the visual impressions in the usual [way], saw a puddle without knowing what a puddle is, could not fall back on any concepts or memories. I found this experience fascinating and liberating. After about 30 minutes all the usual processing mechanisms returned and I experienced a high state of euphoria and bliss.

2115 [. . .] This state is what I like to call the natural underlying consciousness. The fact that it has always been there, and will be, is a great thing to come to terms with. In this state of my "Pure Consciousness," I do not feel I have a body, limbs, hands, thoughts . . . It just IS, as it is. Time definitively doesn't have any value, but I do feel like having control to get back to my normal routine and get some work done.

Tonic Alertness, Wakefulness, and Epistemic Openness

It is a wakefulness for which no words suffice. It is not a definable entity, but at the same time, it is a self-knowing aware emptiness that is clear, lucid, and awake.

—Dakpo Tashi Namgyal (ca. 1513–1587), *Clarifying the Natural State*

In my analysis of canonical texts across many centuries and cultural contexts, I found that by far the two strongest semantic markers for conceptual or theoretical descriptions of pure awareness are "Wakefulness" and "Epistemicity."¹ The second term,

“epistemicity,” refers to the consciously experienced quality of knowing, which can sometimes appear in isolation. Taking the phenomenology of meditation seriously demonstrates that subjective confidence (the nonconceptual experience of knowing the probability that one currently knows or is *able* to know something) can actually emerge without any representation of subject and object. For example, the phenomenology of epistemicity can emerge as an experience of pure knowing or “being of the nature of knowing itself.” We will return to this surprising fact in chapter 5, but also in chapters 18, 19, and 27 to 30.

But what about the concept of wakefulness? Semantically, I found that the experience of wakefulness per se seems directly related to similar phenomenological notions like “mental clarity” (but without mental content), “cognitive lucidity” (but without coherent high-level symbolic thought), and “bare awareness” (but without an object). In this chapter, I will introduce a threefold conceptual distinction and one new conceptual tool, which are designed to do justice to some recent scientific findings and help us better understand our phenomenological reports.

From a philosophical point of view, it is crucial to understand that every phenomenon can be described on different levels of analysis, and our choice of level ultimately depends on what we want to know, on what philosophers might call the “epistemic goal.” Pure awareness in meditation is no exception: It is a phenomenon that can be described on many levels, using many conceptual tools. The empirical literature is often correspondingly unclear and ambiguous in its use of notions like “arousal,” “vigilance,” “sustained attention,” “wakefulness,” and “alertness.”² However, there are two semantic elements in a large majority of scientific treatments: first, epistemic capacity, and second, absence or indeterminacy of representational content. To begin, let us distinguish between the physical, functional, and phenomenological levels of description. I propose to use the relevant key terms as follows:

- “Arousal” is a graded **physical property** of the human brain. The level of arousal is a purely *physical boundary condition* determining the depth of cortical information processing available to the organism as a whole; it causally depends on the local level of activation in five types of neurotransmitter in the ascending reticular activating system, a complex structure that originates in the brainstem.³ Just like the frequency of heartbeat, blood glucose level, or core body temperature, arousal is a *vital parameter* that must be successfully controlled. For example, the control of cortical arousal is necessary to generate the sleep/wake cycle.
- “Tonic alertness” refers to a graded **functional property** that determines the capacity for sustained attention. It is a causal function *resulting* from the successful control

of arousal over longer periods of time (e.g., in the absence of an external cue). Tonic alertness is a functional property that causally enables important cognitive capacities like orientation in time and space, executive control, attention, and mental agency.

- “Wakefulness” is a graded **phenomenal property** that is sometimes introspectively accessible. You can attend to it, but most people rarely do. On one level of description, wakefulness can be interpreted as a special way of *representing* tonic alertness. It may be the major component of the phenomenal character of minimal phenomenal experience (MPE), the nonconceptual awareness of tonic alertness. It may also be fundamental in the sense of being the primary dimension of phenomenal state space.

I think we can get a clearer conceptual picture by focusing on these three properties, which relate to each other in interesting ways. For instance, can there be tonic alertness without the conscious experience of wakefulness? Can one be alert without *knowing* it? The answer is yes, because in some types of coma, patients show no signs of awareness whatsoever while going through a full sleep/wake cycle.⁴ The causal potential inherent in tonic alertness is there; the phenomenal experience of wakefulness is absent. The functional property of tonic alertness, if it is not internally represented and predictively modeled, can exist entirely without the conscious experience of wakefulness (as in cases of unresponsive wakefulness syndrome, known in German as *Wachkoma* [waking coma]). My empirically testable hypothesis is that for some animals (like ourselves), there are two options for controlling their own level of alertness: One that is older, simpler, and more direct, and another that actually uses a *model* to predict and control the level of cortical arousal. Put simply, an organism can be tonically alert without knowing that it is alert: Consciousness is knowing that one is alert.

What about the hardware? In humans, the functional property of tonic alertness is *realized* by certain physical properties of the brain, and we do not yet know exactly what these properties are. Empirical studies involving fourteen expert meditators have shown that only a small number of cells in the ascending arousal system are responsible for modulating and reconfiguring the inner landscape that tracks moment-to-moment changes in conscious experience, with this landscape itself being physically realized by a vast number of cortical neurons.⁵ Conceivably, a nonbiological counterpart to tonic alertness could be realized by very different physical properties in machines. But for neurotypical humans, it is plausible to assume that a critical level of cortical arousal is an important necessary condition. Clearly, both the phenomenal property of wakefulness and the functional property of tonic alertness cannot exist without the physical brain or some equivalent physical implementation.

What do we know about the functional property *connecting* the physical and the phenomenological levels? Tonic alertness is a global functional property, in part physically realized by the level of cortical arousal, and scientists have hypothesized that it is one of the core functions of the cingulo-opercular network.⁶ Interestingly, this brain network is one component of what in folk-psychological contexts we call the capacity for “attention,” and from a scientific perspective, its function for the organism consists in “achieving and maintaining a state of high sensitivity to incoming stimuli.”⁷ Note how scientific descriptions like this strongly resemble descriptions of what mindfulness practice tries to achieve, to a higher degree than we usually experience in “ordinary” waking states. Note also how this opens up the possibility that there could be a baseline level of “tonic mindfulness” that is actually *always* present whenever we are conscious, independent of any form of contemplative practice, but that goes unrecognized because nobody ever tells us that there is something to look for.

The existing neuroscientific findings provide us with important pointers consistent with our phenomenological analysis: Tonic alertness is a (1) sustained and (2) internally initiated “preparedness to process and respond” that (3) implies a capacity for attentional agency, for “coengaging” phasic alertness and selective attention directed at a specific task.⁸ Exactly like the quality of mindfulness that is described as spontaneous and effortless, but that is also actively cultivated by contemplative traditions, it can be described as a global and general mechanism “of keeping cognitive faculties available for current processing demands and holding unwanted activity at bay.”⁹ This is beginning to sound as if there could be a specific sense in which a more global and nonselfy form of “unrecognized mindfulness” is already there, automatically and effortlessly, whenever you think you are conscious. Perhaps *you* aren’t? Perhaps the mindfulness must become aware of itself?

The phenomenology of tonic alertness is the nondual conscious experience of intrinsic and sustained wakefulness. It fluctuates only on the order of minutes to hours. It is entirely nonconceptual, not the result of an inference or a judgment about the current behavioral state (e.g., whether one is asleep or awake). Animals can have it. The subjective experience of bare wakefulness also has no grain or internal structure. It can therefore serve as the best, primordial example of what some philosophers of mind have called the “ultrasmoothness” of qualitative conscious experience (more about this in chapter 6). What’s more, in many classical texts, the phenomenology of wakefulness and epistemicity in meditation is described as functionally autonomous, for example as “self-generating ever-fresh awareness”¹⁰ or as an ordinary, naturally present, and nontransient form of “primordial knowing” (*ye shes* in Tibetan).¹¹ Clearly,

there is a convergence emerging between phenomenological data, ancient conceptual frameworks, and modern neuroscience.

On the empirical side of things, it is plausible to assume that tonic alertness is a causally enabling factor in the realization of two bundles of functional properties that are distinct but closely related: *orientation* and *executive control*. Roughly, being oriented means knowing where you are (e.g., the position of your body in a spatial frame of reference), what time it is now (your location in a temporal context), and who you are (what your name is and which of a number of different persons in some social context you identify with). So, “being oriented” roughly means being aware of three dimensions: time, place, and person. We completely lose the phenomenology of orientation in dreamless sleep, in severe psychiatric disorders, and during full-absorption episodes of pure awareness. All three dimensions disappear during a full-absorption MPE experience, but multiple reports show that unconscious mechanisms in the meditator’s brain always kick back in when there is a sudden change in the environment. The orienting response (sometimes also termed the “orienting reflex”) is an organism’s immediate response to a change in its environment, when that change is not sudden or threatening enough to elicit the startle reflex. When we encounter a novel environmental stimulus, such as a bright flash of light or a sudden loud noise, we will automatically pay attention to it even before identifying it. The startle response or startle reflex, on the other hand, is an equally unconsciously triggered but defensive response to a sudden or threatening stimulus, and experiencing it tends to feel unpleasant. The startle reflex comes directly out of your brainstem and is a largely unconscious, *defensive* response to potentially threatening stimuli, such as a sudden noise or an unexpected sharp movement. Many meditators know exactly how it feels when a sudden deep breath, an automatic orientation response, or even the startle reflex itself terminates an episode of being fully absorbed in the experience of pure awareness. Here is one example from our database:

2774 [. . .] I sink into a state of pure awareness that is impersonal—no person is there, no subject and no object. There is no space, but a feeling of duration. I no longer feel the body. It is dark in the sense of no light and no color. The state feels warm and secure, but only in retrospect. When I am in it, it actually has no real qualities except consciousness/awareness. Occasionally I forget to breathe in it. This becomes noticeable as an indefinable feeling of incongruity, which becomes more and more pressing until I become aware of my creatureliness and my body, start in fright, and breathe in deeply, then I am naturally outside of the state :-) Occasionally I also get frightened because I don’t know

who I am, where I am, and what I am. So I don't know anymore that I am a human being, an individual in a particular location, which causes a brief panic that also throws me out of the state. I no longer know which body, which home station, I must return to. [. . .]

Here, it is important to note that all three functions—alertness as such, orientation, and executive control in terms of the capacity for what I call “attentional agency”—are *epistemic* capacities. They are about acquiring knowledge. For example, “attentional agency” is the ability to deliberately and actively control the focus of attention in a goal-directed manner. At a given point in time, a biological organism may or may not have these capacities. They are also the foundation for what, in 2009, Olaf Blanke and I termed a “strong first-person perspective.”¹² Sometimes you have it; sometimes you don't.

Strikingly, the paradigmatic cases of “pure” consciousness discussed here are characterized precisely by the absence of spatiotemporal self-location. This means that during full-absorption episodes of pure MPE, the subject is not *oriented* toward time or space. What Blanke and I called a “weak first-person perspective” is equally absent. In MPE, we also do not find any personal-level self-representation, and attentional or broader cognitive agency is absent too. This means that when the meditator has dissolved into a state of effortless, wide-awake pure awareness, there are no mental actions occurring like *control* of the focus of attention or one's thought processes. All this is also true of tonic alertness as such. Therefore, it might well be that the minimal form of conscious experience emerges precisely whenever the first functional property—tonic alertness, the causal enabler of orientation and executive control—is represented in the brain. This would give us a first and important building block for a definition of MPE: MPE is a simple and silent way of knowing tonic alertness, but nonegoically and in the absence of a first-person perspective. In the case of a full-absorption episode, we could even say that it is a *state* and a *mode* at the same time¹³ because it is content-specific and global at the same time—like the experience of an “alertness *Ganzfeld*.” In perception research, a *Ganzfeld* (literally a “complete field”) refers to an unstructured, uniform field of stimulation. MPE could be a more abstract version, related not to sensory stimulation itself but to a structureless, uniform *expectation* of knowledge: Pure awareness is the process of nonconceptually knowing that a specific form of openness to the world has been achieved.

Have you ever carefully investigated exactly what happens when you wake up in the morning? What is the very first conscious experience, in the first fraction of a second, before you even remember who you are and what you will do today? I have found that

part of the phenomenology of waking from dreamless deep sleep is a primordial sense of confidence that perceptual states will very soon occur, that one is now “open to the world” and knows about one’s epistemic capacity, and also that one can (and very soon will) know where one is, what time it is, and so on. In a few milliseconds, one will also know *who* one is: Phenomenologically, the gradual transition from unconsciousness to the wake state is characterized by another subtle and intuitive presentiment, something that one might perhaps term a phenomenal “foreshadowing of selfhood.” This is an expectation not merely of knowledge, but of egoic self-knowledge—but *before* it actually manifests.

Waking up involves an anticipation of mental agency and the capacity for global self-control. Phenomenologically, it is the subjective but as yet nonegoic confidence that a full-blown first-person perspective involving executive mental control plus an extended autobiographical self-model will very soon appear. This is what I call the “foreshadowing of selfhood”: The (often very brief) phenomenal quality of subjective confidence that relates to knowledge about the environment and can also extend to the likelihood of egoic self-knowledge, to the capacity for “predicting oneself into existence.”¹⁴ In sum, one important aspect of the phenomenal character of pure awareness can be described as a quality of subjective confidence, an *expectation of epistemic states*. Computationally, wakefulness can now be described as a statistical hypothesis in the brain, a neural representation of the probability that veridical perception will actually occur. If these ideas are pointing in the right direction, then MPE may be intimately related to what happens to all of us every day—namely, in the first few hundred milliseconds of waking up.

Let me now introduce a new phenomenological concept, “epistemic openness.” Epistemic openness is a global form of phenomenal character—namely, a specific form of openness to the world. *Epistēmē* (ἐπιστήμη) is the ancient Greek word for “knowledge”; hence, “epistemic openness” is openness related to knowledge, to the possibility of acquiring knowledge. As we have just seen, there is a whole bundle of functional properties related to tonic alertness that can be successfully described from a scientific perspective. I have no doubt that future neuroscience and computational modeling will arrive at much more detailed descriptions of this bundle of capacities, as specific ways of acquiring knowledge that a biological organism may or may not have. In this new sense of involving a whole bundle of knowledge-enabling properties, epistemic openness is exactly what you gain in the very moment when you wake from dreamless deep sleep, from anesthetic surgery, or from a coma: You regain openness to the world because once again, you now have all the epistemic capacities that you temporarily lost. Of course, this may also be a gradual process, with capacities coming online

one after the other. But in deep sleep, you are almost completely offline; you are not epistemically open to the world. You lose epistemic openness during nocturnal sleep and anaesthesia, but also during episodes of mind-wandering and mind-blanking, and during those short involuntary episodes of “microsleep” that normally last less than fifteen seconds and occur when you are very drowsy but still trying to fight off sleep. Wakefulness, as I have defined it, is knowing one’s own tonic alertness by having a predictive model of it, and it is the key primordial feature of consciousness. Therefore, we can now offer a new building block for a more substantial definition of consciousness: Consciousness is a continuing, ongoing process of nonconceptually knowing the organism’s current state of epistemic openness, of expecting new knowledge without yet having it. The process itself can be transparent (see chapter 28 or figure 34.1 in chapter 34 for more), and normally it leads to the appearance of a whole world filled with existing, knowable things. Pure consciousness is knowing *only* this epistemic openness itself, and calmly abiding in this knowing is a core aspect of what many contemplative traditions teach.

Let us sum up. My first point is that all of what my brief sketch of some scientific facts refers to can also be represented internally, by the system itself, but in an entirely nonconceptual, more parsimonious, and maximally simple way. That is, epistemic openness can be known by the system itself, but in a way lacking all the features that were listed in chapter 3 in the context of “low complexity.” Epistemic openness can be known timelessly, selflessly, without thought or emotion. There is an ineffable “suchness” to the phenomenal experience of wakefulness itself, which involves the qualitative character of something spontaneously revealing or presenting itself (more about this in chapter 9). It can be known nondually, without the knowing self of the meditator actively attending to it (chapter 27). Perhaps epistemic openness can sometimes even nonegoically know itself, as if emptiness were awakening to itself (see chapter 30).

This may be starting to sound slightly mysterious, but I think if we describe pure awareness as the *aperspectival phenomenal experience of epistemic openness*, then we might gain an interesting new conceptual vantage point. In a first approximation, the phenomenology of wakefulness and clarity (to be investigated in chapter 5) would then become the phenomenology of epistemic openness. This special kind of openness forms a highly abstract kind of experiential content because it refers to the mere capacity, not to the actually ongoing actualization or exertion of this capacity. There is no fixation on an object of knowledge. At this point, please recall my speculative but empirically testable hypothesis from earlier (call it the “awakening hypothesis”), which says that from an empirical perspective, MPE might actually be a prolonged version of what happens during the very first milliseconds of the process of waking up in the

morning. On the level of phenomenal experience, to become open to the world means to nonconceptually represent a *possibility*, to represent mere epistemic capacity as such:

- Epistemic openness means that you could now orient yourself in space, but not necessarily that you actually do so. What you actually experience is a potentiality plus a sense of confidence.
- Epistemic openness also means that you could orient yourself in time, toward the Now, by creating a “present” moment. But pure awareness, the actual experience of waking in itself, is still timeless—you are not quite “of this world” yet.
- Epistemic openness also means that you could orient yourself toward the person you take yourself to be, by re-creating a narrative, an autobiographical self-model. But the very first moments of “coming to” are actually still selfless.
- Epistemic openness also means that you could exert executive control, for example by actively controlling the focus of attention. But full-blown MPE is effortless, no mental actions are initiated, and what in chapter 25 we will call the “epistemic agent model” is not yet in existence. Therefore, what is experienced in pure awareness could be the sheer potential to know, a global expectation of states carrying epistemic value, the empty space of all possibilities.

My second concluding point is that the notion of epistemic openness can offer a modern reinterpretation of the ancient Buddhist notion of “emptiness.” I will say more about “emptiness” in chapter 17. For now, we need only distinguish between a *meta-physical* and a *phenomenological* reading of this very special concept—one of the most interesting concepts ever developed in the history of human philosophy. As always, I am not at all interested in metaphysics.¹⁵ I am interested only in the fine structure of consciousness itself. If the phenomenology of epistemic openness is closely related to an abstract space of epistemic possibilities, then the phenomenology of *emptiness* could be interestingly related to a maximally simple and entirely unstructured inner representation of exactly this space. Phenomenologically, this is not some nihilistic void, nor is it a dead form of cold, empty space. Rather, the experience of epistemic openness can be described as a space of nonegoic knowing, of pure aliveness and spontaneous presence. In pure awareness, this space itself is experienced as fundamental, as clear and unobstructed (we will see more of this in the following chapter). Emptiness is nothing nihilistic, but a special kind of openness.

Let me close this chapter by briefly drawing attention to the fact that wakefulness—the conscious experience of tonic alertness—is a prime candidate for something that is largely invariant across cultural contexts and historical epochs. The brain mechanisms that create the sleep/wake cycle are also present in many nonhuman animals living on

our planet because alertness and the bundle of functional properties described earlier have a long biological history. Wakefulness is a very natural and simple state because it rests on innate capacities. A lot of it is hardwired and largely independent of behavioral conditioning, psychological imprinting, and personality traits. Being awake is not something that you have to learn from your parents. Of course, the ways in which you are later able to describe it, the words that you have for it, the degree to which your introspective attention has been educated or cultivated, and even whether you have ever been *made aware* of your very own inborn alertness at all—these may all vary greatly from society to society, from one cultural context to another. But the spontaneous recurrence of epistemic capacity, the regularity of the sleep/wake cycle, and the periodic reopening of your own inner space of knowing are things you share with all other healthy human beings. If anything is a good example of cultural invariance, it must be the primordial phenomenal character of wakefulness itself.

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The Elephant and the Blind

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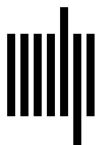
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