

6 Density

Smooth and pristine as silk. [#570]

I learned a lot from the meditators who generously supported us during our pilot studies. In some cases, they drew my attention to specific aspects of experience that had simply not been on my radar before. One of them was “density.” The unbounded space of pure awareness can have a quality of density that perhaps is comparable to the continuum of real numbers in mathematics: Between any two distinct points, there is always another (and hence an uncountable infinity of others exists). A mathematician might say that the relevant space is *complete*, in the sense that it lacks any gaps. It also forms an internally coherent whole; everything hangs together. In this sense, the space of awareness itself is experienced as dense, as homogeneous, and as a continuum.

The experiential quality of density links up with other qualities covered in this book. For instance, it relates to the many descriptions of “connectedness” that we will investigate in chapter 11. It also may help us to better understand some paradoxical reports referring to “emptiness and fullness at the same time” (chapter 17). In my own meditation experience, two other salient qualities are sometimes also intimately related to density. These qualities of pure awareness can be described—and have been described by others—as a “thick silence” (chapter 8) or a “thickness descending,” and as an abstract, nontactile way of being “velvety,” “silky,” or “ultrasmooth.” These phenomenal qualities are sometimes associated with other visual and spatial characteristics, including in constructions that evoke paradoxical combinations of opposites: “Both empty and full, light and dark, velvet and silk” (#577). Pure awareness also has been described as exhibiting a “silvery density”:

3422 [. . .] Although it was new to me, I rather had the impression that it was more or less the normal state, or the state that occurs when I leave everything

else out. Maybe like a primordial state. Or existence in itself. If I were to describe what that might have looked like visually, I would try to come close to it in the combination of very dense and silvery [*sehr dicht und silbern*]. I had already experienced this silvery density [*silberne Dichte*] to some extent in fast *kinhin* [walking meditation], as if I were walking by myself within silvery being [*innerhalb eines silbernen Seins*].

Next, we will look at four examples discussing density, fullness, and emptiness. Following on from density, we will see a second commonality emerging. This one relates to one of the deepest and most subtle phenomenological discoveries ever made within humankind's contemplative traditions: If we look very closely, we may find that emptiness, specifically the spacious quality of epistemic openness, is present *in* appearances themselves. Emptiness can be found not only in the stillness of the silent mind, but sometimes even in objects of perception or *in the thoughts themselves*. We often falsely take having thoughts or perceptions at all to be incompatible with lucidity, clarity, and silence, but these reports show otherwise. More on this discovery later in this book; for now, you may want to watch for this aspect cropping up in the following reports:

2359 [. . .] Little by little, all that remains is “space” filled with slight fluctuations and occasional mental events. I identify this space with “pure consciousness.” At this point my concentration often declines, so that I end the meditation. But a few times I have managed to continue, whereupon the quality of the “space” changes. It then becomes “denser,” and my mental activity continues to decline toward a point of “highest purity” where there is no more mental activity. At this point “time” also seems to slow down. [. . .]

3218 [. . .] The next day during the second meditation I had again waves of bliss but permeated by even more thick, yet dynamic, silence. [. . .] 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. But even better is the analogy of the ocean becoming a wave, because when the faint idea of the thought comes, it is the ocean rising into a wave without losing its status of an ocean, remaining ocean with a slight stir in it—stir is almost too strong a word because it entails an external something stirring, flow is probably better term. The memory of the thought is there while maintaining the memory of the ocean. It is like multiprocessing but almost without the multi.

3029 [. . .] there are experiences of simultaneous emptiness and fullness. They are dense and I feel very present. There are feelings of perfection, unity, and bliss. In these moments Pure Awareness is not disturbed, even when thoughts, images, and memories appear. They are unseparated from the Awareness. [. . .]

3501 I had the impression of briefly experiencing the insubstantiality of *shunyata* [emptiness], then turned my attention away from it, and noticed how the next impression was still like substanceless *shunyata*—that was impressive and encouraging.

Abstract Interoception and Ultrasmooth Embodiment

Whatever is expressed is expressed in the continuum of the nature.

—Longchen Rabjam (1308–1363), *The Precious Treasury of the Basic Space of Phenomena* (10: 117)

Some people love the flavor of a good glass of red wine. Others prefer the subtlety of a specific scent, like the combination of sandalwood, frankincense, cinnamon, and ginger lily. And then there are those who have discovered the silkiness of silence. Philosophers have long discussed the “ultrasmoothness” of perceptual qualities like redness and sweetness, because they come with a problem attached. Many seemingly simple forms of conscious experience driven by sensory perception have a grainless, homogeneous character, a lack of any discernable internal structure: They are “smooth” or “ultrasmooth.” This is sometimes seen as hard to explain using empirical science.¹ In a visually experienced, homogeneous patch of blue, the purported quality of “blueness” itself has no graininess. Is it a phenomenal primitive, something like an atom of consciousness? How could one ever hope to reduce something that has no internal structure to structures in the brain? How could blueness be mapped onto a network of functional relations? In the philosophy of mind, this is known as the “grain problem.”

The phenomenology of density, thickness, and smoothness as described by practitioners of meditation is only one example of a more general pattern that we find in many reports, and it may eventually advance our understanding of the grain problem. Often, there seems to be an abstract, nonsensory aspect of the experience that perhaps can be used to indirectly and metaphorically bring us closer to a better understanding of the phenomenal character of minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) by accentuating a new aspect of the pure-awareness experience. Interestingly, in MPE, we often find an experiential aspect that is still related to one sensory modality, but that already lacks the low-level “data format” of raw sensation and apparently direct perceptual experience. For example, the experience of silence in pure awareness is often described as not being an acoustic silence, as being unrelated to any explicit auditory experience of the complete absence of sound (this is the sudden insight that John Cage had, as described in chapter 3). Equally, the phenomenology of harmony that will be investigated in chapter 7 is not literally acoustic. And the frequently reported sense of profound clarity, as discussed in chapter 5, is not a *visual* form of clarity. The pure-awareness

version of clarity is often figuratively linked to the experience of seeing clearly, having an unobstructed visual space like the vastness of the sky or the seemingly endless surface of an ocean. But there is no stimulus-correlated aspect; the “raw feeling”² of sensory stimulation itself is lacking. The same is true for experiential reports of “radiance” and “luminosity” (chapter 18): Mostly, they do not refer to concrete visual experiences and are only distantly or figuratively related to this specific sensory modality. Many reports point out that the “space” of awareness as a whole is not a physical space because there is no embodied feeling of motion, no perception-based sensorimotor phenomenology that could be related to it. In my own meditation practice, I have found that if I look closely, the “space” is neither inside nor outside. Equally, the phenomenal character of “vibrancy” that some of our participants mention is often not located in a certain region of the body image at all (vibrancy and density recur in chapter 17, “Emptiness and Fullness”). The quality of “gentleness” that sometimes characterizes pure awareness is not a tactile experience, and it is not an emotional state either. Here, my point is that the same is true of the “smooth,” “silky,” and “velvety” character that, according to our reports, the nonconceptual awareness of awareness itself can sometimes have.

In many contexts, then, sensory analogies are drawn in the attempt to approximate some element of the experience of pure awareness. Some sensory modalities are conspicuous by their absence, however. In our reports, pure awareness is almost never compared to an abstract form of tasting or smelling via gustatory or olfactory metaphors. (For interesting counterexamples, see #1381 at the beginning of chapter 3, plus the striking parallels between the notion of “unified taste” in the fourteenth-century Christian mystic Begine of Hadewijch and the Mahāmudra concept of “one taste” in chapter 26.) Similarly, “pain” was one of the two least frequently reported items in our survey, although nociception clearly has a sensory component. All these observations will have to be carefully and systematically investigated by a future science of consciousness. When this happens, the interoceptive self-model and its relation to the phenomenology of pure awareness will be especially interesting to investigate because this experiential level of the self-model in our brain involves the many different signals that are constantly transformed into our experience of the internal state of the body. These ongoing transformations involve the perception of bodily signals arising in muscles, tendons, and joints; vestibular information from the inner ear; visceral signals arising from blood vessels and the heart, lungs, stomach, and bladder; pain perception; information about body temperature processed in the thermoregulatory system; and diffuse signals originating in the body’s endocrine and immune systems.

In his book *Being You*, the British-Indian neuroscientist Anil Seth has made the strong point that what I have called the “interoceptive self-model” is actually a “controlling

hallucination,” and what we experience as our emotions and moods are really control-oriented perceptions that regulate the body’s essential variables. He writes: “At the very deepest layers of the self, beneath even emotions and moods, there lies a cognitively subterranean, inchoate, difficult-to-describe experience of simply *being a living organism*. Here, experiences of selfhood emerge in the unstructured feeling of just ‘being.’”³ In chapter 26, we will find out what meditators have to say about the primordial experience of “nondual being.” One important future research target is the question of why some sensory modalities, like touch, lend themselves to figurative but apposite descriptions of MPE (e.g., as “density” or “smoothness” or “gentleness”), while others rarely appear.

I am intrigued by the following question: Is there a maximally abstract form of interoception? “Interoception” means feeling your own body from the inside, and as we will see in chapters 18 and 24, new research relates meditation experience to the experiential quality of “self-touch.” In our own psychometric study, factor 10 describes MPE as an abstract form of tactile experience resembling self-touch, or even as an experience in which the entire body touches the world while simultaneously being touched by it. Is there a form of “bodiless body-experience” that is based entirely on internal information but lacks the raw feel of sensory stimulation, even from the body’s interior? Are there perhaps ways of experiencing certain aspects of the inner state of the body that are not related to any specific kind of internal receptor, and are maximally simple at the same time?

I think that the answer to all these questions is yes. For example, the experience of “wakefulness” investigated in chapter 4 could be precisely this: a direct and simple way of experiencing one specific aspect of one specific part of the physical body. This aspect could be a stable dynamic signature, a process realized by a pattern of activity in a part of our body that cannot be “directly” perceived because we lack any internal receptor system to feel it—but that sometimes (namely, during the wake state) needs a control-oriented representation. I think that Anil Seth is right, but there is something even more fundamental, something that cannot be properly called a “perception” (because it is not based on sensory receptors of any kind, as in the original Latin meaning of *perceptio*, the gathering or receiving of information “through” the senses) and that is radically nonegoic (because it has nothing to do with being *you*).

In the most general terms, there is no sensory system for the brain. We cannot directly perceive our brain. As all neurosurgeons know, the brain is insensitive to pain. But we are also unable to hear it, see it, taste it, smell it, or feel it—and what we sometimes feel as a headache is in fact the state of the blood vessels in our head. The abstract, nonsensory aspect that is experienced as the thickness or “density” of MPE

therefore could be something more abstract, like a property of the brain's model of tonic alertness portraying the continuous character of epistemic space, the completeness of possible knowledge states expressed as the fieldlike experience of epistemic openness. Density could designate the abstract fact that this organism is now fully alert and open to the world while also successfully sustaining its integrity, being wakefully present while preserving its own existence. My general point is this: An internal state or property that may eventually appear as something highly abstract and complex from the third-person perspective of science could, if viewed from the whole organism's internal perspective, certainly be portrayed as something simple and directly given. Again, please recall how the phenomenology of density, thickness, and smoothness as described by practitioners of meditation turned out to be only one example of a more general pattern.

Here, a new theoretical perspective is emerging that could give us yet another answer to the question "In what sense is pure awareness pure?" Not only does pure awareness lack cognitive content (there are no thoughts), it also lacks perceptual content (there are no sensations), even from the interior of the body—and this could simply be because there are no sensory receptors in the relevant part of the brain. Pure awareness could be a way of experiencing the activity of the aforementioned part of the *neural* body only, albeit on a more abstract and fundamental level of the brain's computational architecture.

If this admittedly radical perspective is not entirely misguided, then there are fundamentally different ways of experiencing the body that you are. For example, when scanning the rich landscape into which meditative attention transforms your body's inner state, you can feel your body by using the conscious body-model automatically activated in your brain. This is called a "body scan," and it is a perfect method for discovering and releasing tensions that you might not even have realized existed (like the one described in the epigraph at the beginning of chapter 1). This meditation technique became well known through the life and work of S. N. Goenka (1924–2013), an Indian teacher of Vipassanā meditation born in Burma. If you do a mindful body sweep with closed eyes, gently and precisely attending to different parts of your body from top to bottom and back again, then what you are actually doing is optimizing the brain's precision expectations, mostly for your interoceptive self-model.

Practicing this carefully in guided meditation on retreat, I sometimes have become consciously aware of aspects of my own embodiment that I had never even known existed—aspects unknown to me my whole life before this moment. For example, on one occasion, I suddenly became aware of the subtle landscape of contact sensations in the upper part of the region where my inner eyelids rest on my eyeballs. And once I

realized that this set of sensations existed, it was hard to ignore or not notice it. I am not a complete outlier in valuing this type of expansion. Some people like to “bathe” their bodily self-model in mindful attention as much as they like showering in literal water.

The conscious body model in our brain, then, is something that can be made richer and more precise, something that can be expanded and “purified” by systematically attending to it. But perhaps you can also feel your body without this low-level, space-bound model? Yes, you can feel it as something that has a shape, that involves a sense of weight and balance and a rich blend of inner sensations, a whole *mélange* of finely nuanced phenomenal qualities. Meditation practice can even make your body “more real” to you, in the sense of bringing some of these aspects into existence. In this sense, it is a creative process. But from a radically naturalistic perspective, you can also feel your body as pure awareness itself, as the silkily silent, crystal-clear quality of epistemic openness. I call this a “radical body scan,” and it can apparently refer to a much more abstract phenomenology of embodiment (more on this in chapter 24). Abiding in the raw and lucid wakefulness of pure consciousness, therefore, may turn out to be a form of *bodily* self-consciousness that has never been recognized as such. To me, our data also clearly show that a *nonegoic* form of self-awareness exists (see chapters 29 and 30). This very subtle, highly intimate, and yet entirely selfless way of being in touch with yourself could provide a new way of understanding the relationship between pure consciousness and bodily self-consciousness. It might also offer us a new way of understanding some body-related concepts that in today’s philosophy are often used in vague and inflated ways—like “embodiment” and “lived experience,” for example.

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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Citation:

*The Elephant and the Blind: The Experience of Pure Consciousness: Philosophy,
Science, and 500+ Experiential Reports*

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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>