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7 Soundness

It felt like a puzzle piece that completed a picture. [#2121]

Can you imagine entering a state of consciousness that makes everything else complete—a global quality that suddenly adds wholeness to all the rest, somehow "making everything fall into place"? This is what the phenomenal character of "soundness" feels like. As the auditory root implies, soundness can also be described as a nonacoustic experience of "global harmony," which makes it interesting in a variety of scientific contexts, including mathematics, computational modeling, and artificial neural networks. In this state, prediction error and surprise seem to be at a minimum, while the global degree of constraint satisfaction appears to be maximal. This is an experiential state that is close to being optimal, and in more than one sense. One of our participants described it as "[h]armonious and peaceful, floating, light and natural" (#221); another said: "My experience was to see/feel everything as pure, everything in harmony, me and the world, the colors, the sounds" (#1025). The phenomenology of internal harmony and consistency has been largely ignored in philosophy of mind and consciousness research. Perhaps soundness is a state that, in their stressful academic lives, self-critical intellectuals and ambition-driven empirical researchers simply do not experience very often. I am very grateful to one advanced meditator who, during the pilot phase in which we developed the first version of the MPE-92M questionnaire, drew my attention to this specific phenomenological aspect of what in German is called *Stimmigkeit*. There is no perfect translation for *Stimmigkeit* as a phenomenological concept, but it unites soundness, harmony, and a more existential sense of "this just feels absolutely right."

Here are five examples of meditators trying to describe pure awareness as an optimal state, characterizing it in terms of "soundness" or "holism," or of being "just right" or "in unison":

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1378 [. . .] What remained was the feeling of a state in which everything was as it should be.

2283 [. . .] Absolute soundness, clarity, and vastness. [. . .]

2524 Everything is harmonious, just right, so that you don't even consciously perceive many things (individually) (not as a stimulus or disturbance e.g. re temperature, pressure, volume, . . .). Everything is self-evident, familiar, clear, as it should be (even if I'm consciously contemplating "problems"). To everything that is thought and imagined, you feel a connection (not in the sense of dependency or the like, but rather as a being-interwoven, as love) and yet clarity (in the sense of a kind of distance, not attracting, not identifying). It is like saying yes, understanding, humming along subliminally, even with those aspects that are condemned or felt as pain in everyday life.

2722 I had the feeling that I'm "round," no problems, no questions, no doubts. Everything is okay as it is, no ifs and buts—this is an absolutely desirable state not only in meditation, but as much as possible day to day.

3517 It is a feeling of being one with yourself and at the same time being part of the world. In harmony/unison [*Einklang*] with yourself and with something higher.

The experience of soundness and harmony often coemerges with the phenomenal character of "pure spatiality," "bodiless body-experience," and "abstract embodiment," which we will investigate more closely in chapters 23 and 24. A couple of tasters, meanwhile:

2594 It feels as if my body is dissolving, my boundaries, everything expands and I forget about time. It feels big and harmonious and I am humbled by the size and harmoniousness and the freedom.

2652 [. . .]—space disappears or rather is boundlessly open—everything is in harmony—everything is my "body"—[. . .]

Finally, soundness can have a strong epistemic quality. It can feel like an insight, but in an entirely nonconceptual way, also like a form of "embodied harmony":

3443 [. . .] "pure awareness" was a knowing felt in the body, not just a standard insight. Whereas a standard insight to me feels cognitive, and comes with a small energetic burst of "surprise" at best, and feels pedestrian, this kind of experience is more characterized by a coming to the obvious, but somehow nonstandard (for me), sense that the sum of all my knowledge, both declarative and experiential (i.e., happened to and felt/remembered through my

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> bodily sensations / experiential body), which is normally dissonant, actually "makes sense" as a whole. [. . .]

The E-fallacy

> The biggest puzzle arising is that comprehension of the One is neither by scientific understanding nor by intellection, as it is in the case of other intelligibles. It corresponds rather to a presence that is better than scientific understanding.
>
> —Plotinus (205–270), *Enneads* VI, 9, 4, 1–4

In this section, I will briefly provide you with one new conceptual tool. I hope that it will help lead us into the next phase of our investigations of pure awareness as it occurs in meditators. In 2014, together with the philosopher Jennifer Windt, I proposed the notion of an "E-error."[1] At the time, we were interested in the phenomenology and epistemological status of intuitive knowledge—that is, in the times where we "simply know" that something is right. Intuition plays a great role in some parts of academic armchair philosophy, like the intuition that zombies (i.e., functional isomorphs lacking phenomenal states, such as creatures indistinguishable from humans in every respect except that they are unconscious) are possible. Another classical philosophical intuition (refuted by the phenomenological data presented in this book) is that consciousness necessarily implies an egoic form of self-consciousness. One explanation of this failure of imagination, also called the "ubiquity thesis,"[2] might go as follows: Every deliberate attempt to imagine a state of consciousness that genuinely lacks self-consciousness is a form of mental action; therefore, as an attempt to actively control your own state of mind, it automatically creates the phenomenology of mental agency, goal-directedness, and effort—thereby sustaining a sense of self precisely when one is trying to imagine its absence.[3] Many of us have a deep-seated philosophical intuition that consciousness without self-consciousness is simply inconceivable, and this intuition might be rooted in the functional architecture underlying human consciousness, which in turn is a product of natural evolution and sociocultural priors. But as Dennett tells us,[4] one should resist the temptation to mistake a failure of imagination for an insight into necessity: From the fact that one cannot imagine being in a state of consciousness entirely lacking self-consciousness, it does not follow that it is nomologically (or even metaphysically) impossible to be in such a state.[5] We have probably all experienced a strong feeling of knowing, or even of certainty, without being able to give any evidence or rational argument to justify it. Intuitive knowledge is often nonconceptual, and it is not based on an inference of conscious thought. But it can

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sometimes be characterized by an exceptionally strong sense of certainty, and in the practical context of everyday life, that is often very helpful.[6] This phenomenology of nonconceptual insight and embodied intuition plays a major role in the contemplative experience of "soundness," and it will also be helpful in understanding many of the other reports presented in this book.

The E-error is an easy fallacy to fall for. It is a category mistake in which epistemic properties are ascribed to something that does not necessarily have them. From the fact that you now consciously perceive a beautiful red flower on the table in front of you, it does not necessarily follow that such a flower exists. Appearance is not knowledge. Consciously experiencing "knowingness" is not the same as *having* knowledge. In the case of perceptual knowledge, you may be having a simple visual illusion, and the flower is actually a deep orange color. Or there may be (as I tend to believe) no colored objects in the outside world at all because wavelength mixtures in front of our eyes are all we ever have, and "colored objects" are merely useful constructs in the brain's internal model of reality. Or, alternatively, the flower itself may not exist at all because you are having a complex hallucination. The flower, the table, and the whole room may not exist at all because you are currently dreaming. And if Advaitic and Buddhist philosophers are on the right track, then even the "knowing self" that is so certain of its own existence could be a mere appearance (chapter 25).

All these ways in which perceptual experience feels like knowledge but isn't apply equally to the inner perception that we currently possess knowledge of a certain kind: This "knowledge" could always be an introspective illusion—an inner form of misperception. As such, the "phenomenal signature of knowing"—as Windt and I dubbed the feeling of knowing—is only appearance. We will encounter this new concept more often as we travel through this book, because variations on the consciously experienced signature help us to better understand certain aspects of contemplative practice. For example, we also find a signature of *self*-knowing, the feeling of self-intimacy and nonconceptually knowing oneself. And there is also an "uncontracted" signature of knowing, one that is not tied to a personal-level self anymore, such as in the phenomenology of "witness consciousness" (chapter 19) and during "clear light sleep" (chapter 20). The E-fallacy applies to all these cases because it consists in falsely concluding that a consciously experienced feeling of knowing is a reliable indicator of actually possessing knowledge. No knowledge claims follow from phenomenological descriptions, and neither do any "direct" epistemological insights. Of course, in most practical situations, the intuitive signature of knowing—which likely has a long biological history—is an excellent guide to dealing with other human beings and a complex environment, especially if we need to act fast. But the point is that at any moment, there

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always can be one of two subjectively indistinguishable states of consciousness—one of them providing us with a genuine form of insight and the other being a misrepresentation of reality.

Take intuitive knowledge as a first example. As an author, you can have a strong intuition that your agent is a morally good person or that you are dealing with a trustworthy publisher—but of course, you might later discover that you were wrong. If intuitions are indeed mental states characterized by a specific phenomenology of knowing, then the attempt to simultaneously characterize them as involving genuine insight and as being the basis of knowledge rests on the E-fallacy. The feeling of knowing is not the same as knowing; the phenomenology of direct evidence is not evidence. Assuming that they are the same thing is a category mistake in which epistemic properties are ascribed to subjective appearances, which do not intrinsically possess them. Whenever we derive strong theoretical claims about consciousness itself from apparently "self-evident" subjectively experienced truths, this is the mistake that we are making. Are zombies *really* conceivable? Sure, if you decide they are. In academic philosophy, this is called "intuition mongering"—and there are areas in the field that are highly specialized in it. You can make a living out of it.

As we wrote in 2015, in our introduction to the Open MIND collection, "What does it mean to have an open MIND?" (which is freely available on the internet):

> If one takes the phenomenal character of intuitions seriously, this ability clearly seems to be an epistemic ability: *prima facie*, to have an intuition means to have the subjective experience of knowing something, directly and immediately, without necessarily being able to express this knowledge linguistically or to provide an epistemic justification. Typically, inner experience seems to present knowledge to the subject of experience, even if one does not know how and why one possesses this knowledge. Intuitions are the phenomenal signature of knowing, a seemingly direct form of "seeing" the truth. As soon as we ascribe epistemic status to intuitions on the basis of their phenomenology alone, however, we commit the E-error. "Epistemicity," the phenomenal quality of "insight" and "comprehension," or the feeling of being a knowing self, as such is only a phenomenal quality, just as redness, greenness, and sweetness are.[7]

A common context in which this feeling of "epistemicity" arises is when taking psychoactive drugs.[8] When on some drugs, people may feel a deep and blissful sense of "embodied harmony" without actually being in a state that is anywhere close to optimal in the overall context of their lives. (This may or may not be different for meditators.) The harmony that they feel, therefore, may be a mere appearance—*phenomenal*

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harmony—not the genuine epistemic soundness of everything that one already knew actually "falling into place." When on other drugs, people may have a dramatic phenomenology of insight without later being able to say what that insight was about, or whether it even had any content. Nevertheless, the phenomenal signature of knowing may be more intense than it could ever be in ordinary waking states. And of course, under the influence of substances like the classic hallucinogens explored by Aldous Huxley and millions of seekers before and after him, we can often find intense experiences of meaningfulness and spiritual or religious certainty. But meaning is not the same as the experience of meaningfulness, and the phenomenology of certainty is not necessarily a state in which one really, accurately "knows that one knows."

Intuitive knowledge was our first example: You think that your agent is a morally good person, you believe that zombies are conceivable. Psychoactive substances were the second illustration: Not all drug-taking generates illusory epistemicity, but it is a context that creates a lot of potential for such illusions to arise. For example, some successes of psychedelic and other insight-based forms of psychotherapy might be based on "placebo insights."[9] A third paradigmatic context for misplaced epistemicity is in the experience of so-called ecstatic epileptic seizures. The French epileptologist Fabienne Picard has presented striking case studies of patients who experienced strong feelings of subjective certainty, including in the form of religious beliefs, during epileptic seizures. These cases are particularly interesting since the beliefs seemed entirely convincing during the seizures, even though they contradicted the patients' longstanding convictions. Neuroscientific research suggests that the anterior insula is involved in signaling uncertainty, or the fact "that there is something we do not understand."[10] This registering of uncertainty and ambiguity then goes on to cause an aversive affective state, often involving feelings of discomfort and anxiety of the type that we continuously try to minimize.

By contrast, however, direct electrical stimulation of a small area in the dorsal anterior insula causes intense feelings of bliss.[11] It has been suggested that such blissful states, if occurring in the context of epileptic seizures, may be associated with maximized coherence of what (in my 2003 book *Being No One*) I called the "phenomenal self-model." Subjectively, this coherence is manifested as a dramatically heightened sense of self, an intense phenomenal experience of presence, integratedness, harmony with the world, and strong positive emotion.[12] In one study, Fabrice Bartolomei and colleagues caused states of this type by directly stimulating the dorsal anterior insula. In their own words:

> Ecstatic epileptic auras consist of a sensation of "hyper-reality." The patients use terms such as "clarity," "evidence," "certainty," "understanding," "insight," "enlightenment"

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> or "epiphany." Dostoevsky gave a famous description of such seizures, that he experienced himself and in which he reached a wonderful state of clarity and bliss. The phenomenological detail of the ecstatic aura includes three important points: bliss ("the immense joy that feels me is above physical sensations"), a sense of certainty ("things suddenly seemed self-evident"), and a sense of timelessness or a sense of being in an eternal now ("These moments are without beginning and without end").[13]

The second feature listed here clearly shows how the epistemic feeling of knowing that one knows can be directly caused by a purely physical event, by local electrical stimulation in the brain, and in a situation where likely no additional knowledge about the external world is gained.

On the other hand, none of what I have said in the second part of this chapter shows that any of the phenomenological reports presented in the first part necessarily refer to fully illusory states. Nor is a patient's feeling of insight during a psychotherapeutic process using psilocybin or LSD necessarily a mere hallucination. Therapeutic success will often result from epistemic progress, from the growth of knowledge caused by the creation of a new, improved, or "repaired" model of reality in the patient's brain.[14] The psychological and epistemic benefits of a sustained meditation practice can also be significant. It is just that all knowledge claims made in public need independent justification.

What all this shows is that phenomenal experience is not knowledge, and in attending to the phenomenology of pure awareness, we must always be careful not to commit the E-fallacy. These experiences feel so valuable and important that the corresponding verbal reports deserve to be taken seriously, and this implies open-mindedness and intellectual honesty, including a healthily skeptical attitude when it comes to epistemological or metaphysical claims made in the public sphere.[15] Most of the reports discussed here do not make such claims; they make a generous contribution to consciousness research without pretensions to more than personal meaning. But there is an interesting phenomenological overlap between the conscious experience of soundness, certainty, self-evidence, and timeless insight in meditation; experiences like mathematical and philosophical intuition; and deep psychedelic experiences and ecstatic epileptic auras. Not all these states are examples of knowledge possession.

My point is that theoretical knowledge cannot be simply "read off" from contemplative experience, as if bootstrapping a theory of consciousness out of the "knowingness" that accompanies the pure-awareness experience itself. Yet, of course, it is equally important not to fall into the opposite extreme: It would be false to conclude that

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consciously experienced feelings of knowing are *never* reliable indicators of genuine insight. It is just that, merely by virtue of happening, they do not justify sweeping theoretical claims. At its core, meditation itself is clearly an epistemic practice (more on this in chapter 17), but it is also one that doesn't operate on the level of theories, words, or concepts at all. The really interesting question is how we decide what the epistemological status of any given experience may be. As soon as we have a conceptually clear phenomenological description of our research target, MPE will also require the attention of analytical epistemologists. But can there be any kind of philosophically convincing link between silence and words—between the soundness of empty cognizance and other, more theoretical forms of knowledge?

I confess that I find myself uncertain at this point. The spiritual traditions have long said that staring at the finger is not the same as seeing the moon. Are the fingers with which humans have for so long been pointing at the moon good enough? Lars Sandved-Smith, a practicing philosopher and modeler, coined (in a personal conversation) the beautiful metaphor of an absolutely precise laser beam with which we might actually touch the moon for the first time. Perhaps a real contribution might be to bring together the best of modern science and philosophy in creating better, longer, more dexterous, and much more delicate fingers to connect silence and words in new ways? Or is theorizing merely an escape from what is really at stake, and thus nothing but a clever avoidance strategy? Do we really need to prove that such a connection exists? And what would it mean to let go of the deep-rooted need for emotional security that might often go hand in hand with the search for such a connection?

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The Elephant and the Blind

The Experience of Pure Consciousness: Philosophy, Science, and 500+ Experiential Reports

By: Thomas Metzinger

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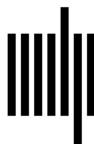

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