

## 9 Suchness

When openness touches openness. [#1444]

For many centuries, meditators have been describing states of direct perception, the experience of seeing *what is*. Meditation involves a distinct phenomenology of perceiving, timelessly, without any conceptual overlay or any form of judgment, interpretation, or choice. Seeing *what is* out of a state of pure awareness often reveals another particular and extremely interesting phenomenal quality—namely, the experience of “suchness.” I personally find this to be a profound kind of phenomenal character—one that is also a prime example of what it means to be ineffable, to resist any form of conceptual approximation. Perhaps one could begin by saying that, in ordinary perception, “suchness” is the additional phenomenology of nonconceptuality and openness itself. Sometimes it is recognized, but often it is not.

I have already offered a phenomenological reinterpretation of “emptiness” as “epistemic openness.” One prediction would be that in all situations in which subject/object structure fades away, “emptiness” and “epistemic openness” will be properties not only of the conscious mind, but also of what were previously taken to be inanimate perceptual objects. Suchness then becomes the emptiness of appearances in the more precise sense of their being epistemically open, for example in terms of lacking a pre-determined conceptual essence. Things appear without conceptual overlay; there is no ready-made conceptual interpretation that categorizes or automatically evaluates them in any way. Accordingly, the influence of past experience is minimal; there is no recognition. Pure awareness is nonreactive, and therefore experiencing suchness also means experiencing the world without perceiving any affordance for action. In suchness, the quality of appearance *itself* becomes very salient. Interestingly, this also leads to a positive reading of the term “meaningless”: The phenomenology of nonconceptuality is the conscious experience of things simply appearing, timelessly presenting themselves

in consciousness, without cognitive penetration, free of any fixed meaning. According to conscious experience, things that are perceived do not refer to anything outside of themselves anymore, neither to the past nor to the future. The phenomenology of suchness and of seeing *what is* is the phenomenology of meaninglessness: Now, it is not just pure awareness that is epistemically open; all conscious percepts, all appearances themselves are as well. Each appearance is a vast space of epistemic possibilities, of possibilities to be known from an infinity of perspectives.

At this point, continuing our discussion from chapter 8, we also find yet another phenomenologically grounded reading of what the “purity” of pure awareness might consist in (in our summary, I will call it “P4”; see chapter 34). It is not that there is no perceptual content whatsoever. The complete lack of conceptual overlay, including time experience and judgment as to the “existence” or “nonexistence” of what is perceived, is what really makes pure awareness—and whatever appears within it—pure. According to subjective experience, meditation practice often brings us into a deeper and more direct contact with reality. From a third-person perspective, this phenomenological observation also leads to a deeper understanding of the second, slightly simplified reading of “purity” (P2) as presented in chapter 8: The absence of all discursive thought leads to a suspension of prior knowledge and expected probabilities. This creates a conscious model of reality that is “temporally thin,” in that it does not contain past experiences and simulated futures anymore—if you will, you now see the world in a way that is not (or to a much lesser degree) contaminated by counterfactual aspects. Therefore, pure consciousness is not just the phenomenology of “not thinking,” of mere mental inaction; it is also an experience of timeless immediacy—of perceiving *what is*. Let us now look carefully at some examples from real-world practitioners:

2420 Very hard for me to describe—answering all these questions was possible but even that required some conceptualization that only seemed to approximate the experience. Main feeling I had was just of seeing everything as it truly is.

2754 [. . .] An altered perception, more authentic, more real, more unfiltered.

2426 [. . .] I felt and thought that for the first time I was perceiving reality correctly. [. . .]

2935 [. . .] it was as if a theater curtain was pushed aside and I could perceive unfiltered. My eyes were still closed. It was as if I was in an empty space from which I could decide what I wanted to look at next. When I then, after some time, opened my eyes, this state continued. It was pure perception and amazement. I was completely relaxed and left the house. I went for a walk and was amazed. Everything was good. At some point this state must have stopped; at some point thoughts must have started, and needs, so that I disappeared

back into everyday life. Since then I have been longing for it so much that ultimately there is no longer anything more important for me.

We will return to the notion of “filters” being removed in the second half of this chapter. For now, let us stay with simple, pure consciousness in the context of systematic contemplative practice. Phenomenologically, pure consciousness is “pure” because it is experienced as direct, as entirely unmediated by conceptual thought. But it is also pure in that it does not originate from an egoic point of view, while at the same time having the capacity to *contain* one. As a matter of fact, perhaps subjectivity itself, or what philosophers sometimes call the “first-person perspective,” is merely one of these filters described by our meditators, a stage curtain that can be opened or closed. Behind this curtain, we would discover silence and clarity. Philosophically, it is plausible to assume that the “abstract space of knowledge” already discussed thus far can either be explicitly corepresented during the process of perceptually experiencing the world or not. The degree to which this happens would then determine the degree to which someone experiences the phenomenal quality of epistemic clarity and of “nonconceptually knowing that one knows”:

940 [. . .] After a while all thoughts, including the mantra, became very quiet and hardly perceptible. The feeling arose as if the mantra was falling “through me.” The “mental space” began to expand and became steadily larger. As if a switch was flipped, all mental content, like auditory and visual thoughts, emotions, memories, or ideas, stopped. The absolute silence in my mind was enormous and it was spacious, very spacious, perhaps endless. I opened my eyes and all the objects of the room were there as usual, but I saw them with a kind of transcendent clarity. As if the contrast was stronger than usual, as if my glasses had just been ultrasonically cleaned. Everything was clearer and more distinct. This state lasted for an indefinite period of time. [. . .]

The experience of epistemic openness and spacious awareness can take place in complete silence (see chapter 3) after all other content has disappeared. After the experience has stabilized, however, it sometimes may be possible to “reinvite” the contents of sensory perception, for example by slowly opening one’s eyes. What this adds is the experience of “epistemic lucidity,” which we investigated in detail in chapters 4 and 5 (for examples, see the beginning of report #2935 and the end of #940). Perceptual experience may then unfold, but now it is enveloped in a subtle quality of clarity, as if “suspended” in an unobstructed, global space of lucid awareness and infinite silence (for more on this aspect, see chapter 28, “Transparency, Translucency, and Virtuality”). Alluding to traditional Buddhist descriptions, we could call this specific combination

of lucid clarity and spacious awareness with ongoing sensory perception “seeing out of luminous emptiness.” As we have just seen, some practitioners also describe it as “a kind of transcendent clarity.”

“Suchness” and “thusness” are originally Buddhist terms (from the Pali *tathatā*). Over many centuries of Buddhist philosophy, intricate technical debates have centered on how *tathatā* (or *dharmatā*) relates to *śūnyatā*—that is, how the notion of suchness relates to the concept of emptiness. As early as the fifth century, Chinese Buddhists began to discuss the “Buddha-nature of insentient objects,”<sup>1</sup> and many believe that the Buddha referred to himself as the *Tathāgata*—which can be interpreted as “One who has arrived at suchness.”

“Suchness” is clearly an important conceptual tool for phenomenologists—one that Western philosophy has been lacking (although interesting links can be drawn to Latin concepts like *quidditas* and *haecceitas*, if one strips out their metaphysical context).<sup>2</sup> But we must be aware that some of our experiential reports may be strongly colored by the fact that their authors knew about Buddhist philosophy and “suchness.” Some of our practitioners (as well as famous writers like Aldous Huxley, whom we will meet later) actually used this specific term to describe their experience:

2652 [. . .] feeling of “suchness”: deeply moved by e.g. a coffee cup or any object.  
2803 [. . .] with open eyes long-lasting state of a very clear and bright perception, closely connected with thusness [*So-Sein*], in peace with the thusness.

2691 [. . .] The best way to describe it is to say that “there was an appearance.” It was blindingly obvious that some things simply were “so.” I stood and “watched” this, but it was not “me” doing the watching. My internal world and the external world were “complete” in and of themselves. I “knew” that some personal beliefs I usually possess, and hold, were no longer relevant, and a wider understanding of the human condition took its place. I knew what I was experiencing, it was not imaginary, but the knowing was also beyond me. There was a universality about it.

3160 [. . .] Outside on the street there was a sound and in that moment it was clear to me that it is not a self that perceives the sound, but that there is awareness in/with the sound. There existed a perception that the sound appears in space with awareness and “recognizes itself.” Other perceptions, e.g., visual objects, bodily sensations, were also appearances of/with awareness without being tied to a perceiver or being perceived by a perceiver. Just an appearance of appearances. This experience/view has no mystical quality, but a quality of “ordinary suchness.” It simply is the way it is. One minute amazing and full of joy, but at the same time very simple. [. . .]

The phenomenology of direct perception and suchness can be accompanied by the phenomenal character of “sensationless awe” that we touched on in chapter 1 and will investigate in more depth in chapter 15.

3146 [. . .] There was a quality of gentleness and wonder, not in any words or concepts, but more as a pervasive feeling of “this is it, this is how everything truly is.” [. . .]

Direct perception is simple and effortless and can include a quality of all-encompassing insight, which may take in the deep structure of conscious experience itself:

2673 Single-pointed, my perceptions were simple. Effortless, not separated. Clear, a resonance in the deepest being, in the experience itself a feeling that in retrospect I would describe as seeing and understanding everything.

2422 I felt as if I was experiencing the fundamental structure of experience, during meditation.

Perceptual acuity itself seems to improve during episodes of direct perception:

1661 I had pristine unmediated access to all of my sense fields. Every detail of sensory input was more vivid and more present than they ever are during ordinary consciousness. I could experience internal discourse but very little of it arose naturally, it was a wilful exertion to talk to myself, and when I didn’t exert there was very limited chatter, and what chatter there was was quiet and did not demand much attention as it typically does. The overwhelming feeling of the completeness of the present moment pervaded the experience. [. . .]

3146 [. . .] Lights were bright, details of objects became clearer, the body sort of became lighter, felt a bit like floating [. . .]. There was a quality of gentleness and wonder, not in any words or concepts, but more as a pervasive feeling of “this is it, this is how everything truly is.” Like sticking my head above water after being held under for aeons, seeing the blue, open sky. Senses were extremely sharp and acute, yet I didn’t form any opinions about the flowers I passed as I walked to the top of the hill, no words about anything inside or out, just, for lack of a better word, luminosity.

The transition to the phenomenology of “suchness” can be sudden, and the egocentricity of the overall state may be weakened:

2357 A sudden shift in perception. Very quick, instantaneous. Suddenly reality hit me. I felt that in the moment that I just sunk down to the root of reality. It was very sudden. A shock really. Really jolting.

2295 [. . .] and for a short moment I had the feeling that the perspective shifted from myself to an “objective” perspective. As if the border between my face and the world were transparent. Douglas Harding’s explanation of being “headless” conveys it best. [. . .]

The experience of suchness can also be accompanied by the qualities of “soundness” (chapter 7) and “luminosity” (chapter 18), and it can lead to episodes of nondual awareness (chapter 27):

2775 [. . .] I was pretty shattered and finding it hard to concentrate in meditation. However, the garden was remarkably silent, and this caught my attention and led me to notice that nothing was wrong. [. . .] One single yellow rose with red highlights lit up in a way which expressed the experience. I was helpless but to be at one with it. I realized that its luminosity was a gift arising in consciousness moment by moment, with no attempt to try to understand. It was a blessing which didn’t last long [. . .], but which made an indelible impact on my awareness. [. . .]

3160 [. . .] Once I took up this view from the subtle view of an observer, then the space/consciousness was filled with a kind of vibration and a kind of inner glow (which has nothing to do with real brightness). Once I let the subtle view of the observer go, then everything was just as it was, without any other specific quality.

3338 [. . .] I can reach states of pure awareness without much effort. I simply sit down and “peel off” my conditioning completely and let everything go. It is as if I let go of my whole existence. There the space for pure awareness opens up—and the ego-centered qualities recede and become unimportant—it’s hard to describe it—it’s a space where there is no difference between viewer and viewed, between perceiver and perception—everything is as it is—suchness—awake, present, now. I often don’t hold this state very long, maybe a few moments or minutes. It doesn’t really matter how often or how long, because I know that this suchness is always there, not far away, always available, just a breath away or already there, that “it” is already “in” any thing that I perceive, at any time. The experience of open awareness has permanently changed my perception of the dual, everyday world. The change in perspective is small, but substantial. I live and experience the world from both perspectives, the dual perspective with the “me and you” and the perspective of open awareness, in which there is no “me” and no “you.” And something else is important: The open awareness showed me the emptiness or conditionality of things, but

at the same time also the completeness. I am amazed and astonished by the Hundreds of Thousands of Things. A miracle!

### Timeless Self-Evidencing and “Seeing What Is”

And there is in Lao-Tzu’s story of existence another seminal name for the whole of it: *tzu-jan* [ . . . ]. Literally meaning “self-so” or “the of-itself,” *tzu-jan* was meant to emphasize the particularity and self-sufficiency, the *thusness*, of each of the ten thousand things that make the generative process of Tao. And so, it is best translated as “occurrence appearing to itself,” which opens a first description of the Cosmos here in the beginning where the existence-tissue is whole; “from nowhere else, occurrence.”

—David Hinton (\*1954), *Existence*

There are indeed things that are inexpressible. These *show* themselves; they are the mystical.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.522

Let us begin by drawing a parallel. The notion of a curtain being drawn or of “filters” being removed (e.g., in reports #2426 and #2935) is a classic theme found in many attempts to describe “suchness” or the experience of “seeing *what is*” in altered states of consciousness not brought about by meditation practice. Aldous Huxley opens *The Doors of Perception* (1954) with a quote from William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1794): “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.” Of course, the phenomenology of “suchness” is a well-known feature of the psychedelic experience too. Here, it can be extremely dominant, rather than being a subtle, self-disclosing feature as it is in meditative perception. Let me cite one of my favorite descriptions of a mescaline-induced state of *seeing what is*, written by Huxley himself:

I was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation—the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence. [ . . . ] *Istigkeit*—wasn’t that the word Meister Eckhart liked to use? “Is-ness.” The Being of Platonic philosophy—except that Plato seems to have made the enormous, the grotesque mistake of separating Being from becoming and identifying it with the mathematical abstraction of the Idea. He could never, poor fellow, have seen a bunch of flowers shining with their own inner light and all but quivering under the pressure of the significance with which they were charged; could never have perceived that what rose and iris and carnation so intensely signified was nothing more, and nothing less, than what they were—a

transience that was yet eternal life, a perpetual perishing that was at the same time pure Being, a bundle of minute, unique particulars in which, by some unspeakable and yet self-evident paradox, was to be seen the divine source of all existence. [. . .]

Confronted by a chair which looked like the Last Judgment—or, to be more accurate, by a Last Judgment which, after a long time and with considerable difficulty, I recognized as a chair—I found myself all at once on the brink of panic. This, I suddenly felt, was going too far.

In chapter 32, we will briefly look at four descriptions of minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) experiences under the influence of LSD and psilocybin, as given by our meditators; and in chapter 26, we will encounter Meister Eckhart's concepts of *ist*, *istic*, and *istikeit*<sup>3</sup> for a second time. For now, let us stay with the phenomenal character of suchness as it sometimes occurs during ordinary contemplative practice. The parallels between the drug-induced and the meditation-induced experiences will become obvious.

Before we move on, please recall how the phenomenal *experience* of knowing does not entail that one really possesses knowledge. A strong and robust experience of knowing, even of absolute certainty, can occur during hallucinations, in dreams, and during psychiatric diseases or epileptic seizures. In chapter 7, we termed this the “E-fallacy.” Equally, the experience of having “direct” or “immediate” knowledge of *what is* does not imply any kind of justification or directness from an epistemological perspective. Epistemologically, there is no certainty here. All we have is the phenomenal experience of immediacy, and “suchness” is being used here solely as a phenomenological concept. In connection with the experience of suchness, Rob Burbea also has made clear for contemplative practice itself that any remaining form of intuitive realism is an obstacle that must be overcome.<sup>4</sup> In interpreting all the reports in this chapter, therefore, we must be careful not to jump to overly naive and simplistic interpretations of “direct perception” and the reported phenomenology of nonconceptually seeing *what is*. The experiences themselves are simply much too interesting.

Even in calm and undramatic states of meditation, there is an enigmatic aspect to the phenomenology of suchness. As I said at the very beginning of this chapter, if anything is the epitome of ineffability—or at least of something for which we lack any established terminology—then it is probably the experiential character of suchness or thusness, as it sometimes reveals itself in the meditator's perceptual experience of seeing *what is*. In the introduction, we defined “concurrent ineffability” as a property of certain conscious experiences: the fact that they cannot be reported while taking place. But becoming aware of suchness can also mean beginning to realize that there is a valid



sense in which *every* conscious experience is ineffable while it unfolds. Yet what *is* suchness, the epitome of ineffability? I would try to describe it as a combination of timeless change, epistemic self-revelation, and a profound form of “meaninglessness”—but a form that is in no way experienced as negative.

In his *Tractatus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein bluntly affirmed the existence of ineffable aspects of reality when he wrote, “*Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches*” (There are indeed things that are inexpressible). He also did not shy away from calling them “the mystical.” But given the subject of this book, it is interesting to note that the two major English translations of the passage cited in this chapter found different solutions for conveying what he then had to say about the mystical: “*Dies zeigt sich.*” One translation (by Ogden and Ramsey) reads: “There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical.” The other translation (by Pears and McGuinness) has this: “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.” I think that both translations excellently pick out the key aspects that, in a phenomenological reading, characterize the nonconceptual character of suchness. Suchness has a quality of self-disclosure and of self-manifestation at the same time.

I also believe that understanding suchness may get us very close to understanding what *appearance*—conscious experience itself—ultimately is. As the poet David Hinton evocatively points out (see the first epigraphical quote in this section), it is as if the sheer generative process of world manifestation spontaneously turns back onto itself, thereby continuously appearing to and within itself, occurrence recurring to occurrence. Our problem is that most of us grew up in a cultural context that never provided us with the words we would need, with the conceptual tools and mental techniques that could help in communicating or even recognizing this aspect of our own lived experience. You certainly do not have to be a meditator to become aware of it—but for most of us, it has to be pointed out before we can begin to see it. One interesting question is whether MPE has its own quality of suchness, or whether we should rather think of it as identical to what we later call “suchness.” But let me first try to describe the phenomenal character of suchness as precisely as I can.

First, perceptual objects, if seen by a silent, crystal-clear mind, can adopt a quality of timelessness. On closer inspection, this is actually a phenomenology of “timeless change,” because it involves a dynamic element. Aldous Huxley pointed to this when describing the “transience that was yet eternal life” as “a perpetual perishing that was at the same time pure Being.” My first philosophical point is to forestall a conclusion that is easily drawn but faulty. The implicit metaphysical assumptions underlying our crude folk-psychological system for describing our own conscious minds are structured

by opposites taken to be incompatible. So we say that something is *either* being *or* becoming, *either* timeless *or* flowing, *either* static *or* dynamic. From these linguistically embedded assumptions, however, it does not follow that all subjective experiences actually have these either/or structures. Our very own phenomenal experience may defy all the distinctions that we impose on it—especially when it concerns something nonconceptual. We will devote a whole chapter to the phenomenology of timelessness and timeless change later in this book (chapter 22); I will also return later to the issue of “paradoxical” experiences. For now, we can simply observe that the distinctions between full reification and flow, between timelessness and the dynamics of ongoing change, are among the many unconscious predictions that our enculturated minds make, but they can sometimes be suspended and give way to a new form of phenomenal experience that is liberated from any given pair of imposed opposites. This suspension may even be experienced as an insight, a temporary relief from “the grotesque mistake of separating Being from becoming.”

The second phenomenal characteristic of suchness is even harder to understand on a conceptual level. At least in my own experience, “suchness” has a quality of epistemic self-disclosure, as if the nonconceptual content were continuously “pointing to itself” or “self-revealing.” This happens via a subtle dynamic of spontaneous self-presentation in which an aspect of experience makes itself knowable. There is a loopiness in this element of suchness. Experience does not refer to past or future; rather, it timelessly refers to *itself*. In my own experience, this nonconceptual form of self-reference also has an interesting, yet hard-to-describe quality of “salience” to it.<sup>5</sup> It is as if the phenomenal character of “wakefulness,” investigated in chapter 4, were no longer contracted into a knowing self, but as if, perhaps shockingly, the world itself or individual perceptual objects had begun to awaken. In his 2019 book *Awakened Cosmos*, David Hinton remarks that *tzu-jan* literally means “self-ablaze.” It is tempting to describe the epistemically open, but at the same time reflexive, character of suchness in terms of a perceptual object being “epistemically self-ablaze.” Could this be what makes the perceptual object conscious in the first place? What would it mean for a whole person to become “epistemically self-ablaze”?

Another way to describe the aspect of suchness that I am trying to isolate could be to use the rather technical-sounding concept of “subsymbolic token-reflexivity.” A representation is subsymbolic if it is constituted by entities that are not themselves representations, like the neurons or synapses in your brain, the pixels on your screen, or individual samples of a signal. A “subsymbolic” representation is something nonlinguistic, and the units in neural networks can be considered particular cases of this category. In language, the meaning of a token-reflexive expression mentions the particular

expression whose meaning it is. For example, a “self-pointing” expression like “I *hereby* apologize!” actually refers to the expression or speech act in which it occurs. Suchness is a little bit like a perceptual object saying, “I *hereby* manifest myself!” or “I *hereby* present myself to you!”—but without words. Phenomenologically, this also creates salience and significance because it immediately attracts attention. In a way, it seems to shout “Look at me!” and “Look at *me!*” at the same time—but in utter silence. Of course, there is a lot of philosophically deep water here. But isn’t something very similar true of the suchness in a flower as seen from the emptiness of an entirely silent mind—does the flower not express a nonlinguistic form of *pure meaning* that consists only in directly signifying its own particularity, at once dynamically and timelessly?

The simple question that I want to ask is whether the “self-revealing,” “self-disclosing,” or “self-pointing” character of phenomenal suchness could be a subsymbolic variant of this larger category of process, perhaps an indicator of part of what goes on in the brain of the meditator. “Subsymbolic” means that we are dealing only with connections between nodes, or fluid patterns of activation, such as in a neural network. In a standard neural net, there are no hard symbols or “atoms of meaning”; there is no syntax and no semantics, no fixed inner language. Is what suchness tells us, entirely without words, actually something like: “*That flower,*” “*This is what this particular flower looks like,*” or “*I hereby present myself as a flower*”? If we take the phenomenology of pure-awareness experiences seriously, there seems to be a recurrent process at work that is constantly signifying itself, constantly pointing to itself, but in a “thin” way, predicting only its very own occurrence in the very next moment. Could this phenomenological feature be hinting at the underlying neurocomputational structures and physical correlates?

I think the nonegoic experience of suchness is a clear point in favor of one specific theory of consciousness—namely, Victor Lamme’s “recurrent processing theory of consciousness,” sometimes also called the “reentry model.”<sup>6</sup> Lamme argues that localized recurrent or reentrant processing within the perceptual parts of our brain is sufficient to give rise to consciousness, and the parietal and frontal regions might be required only for later reporting the contents of perceptual experience or drawing on them for reasoning and decision-making. Taking the experience of suchness as seriously as we can is of pivotal importance because in my view, it demonstrates that the first element, conscious experience, can exist without the other ones: reasoning, perspective-taking, and decision-making. The phenomenology clearly has a first-order, self-reflexive element, and it relentlessly creates the evidence for its own existence. Just think of the two Wittgenstein translations presented previously: The mystical *discloses* itself and *manifests* itself. We could parse these as highlighting the ways in which suchness is always signifying its own being and being its own signification, respectively. One last time, in

the words of Aldous Huxley: “shining with their own inner light and all but quivering under the pressure of the significance with which they were charged; [Plato] could never have perceived that what rose and iris and carnation so intensely signified was nothing more, and nothing less, than what they were.”

In 2016, the Danish-Australian philosopher Jakob Hohwy published an important article entitled “The Self-evidencing Brain.”<sup>7</sup> Part of his core proposal was that the human brain is constantly producing evidence for its own existence, by predicting future states in which it still exists. It is as if an organism were treating its own future existence as a hypothesis and continuously trying to find proof or new evidence for the truth of this hypothesis. Here are my questions: Could it be that individual brain states temporarily do the same? Could it be that there is actually a whole nested *hierarchy* of self-evidencing states, and that precisely this is what makes human embodiment so very different from that which any nonbiological machine or intelligent robot could have? For Hohwy, “self-evidencing” is an epistemological and a computational notion. But here, my point is that there is also an interesting *phenomenological* reading of this concept because it seems to have correlates in conscious experience itself.<sup>8</sup> I would like to call the experiential side of self-evidencing “the phenomenology of epistemic self-validation.” This would mean that multiple entities in our conscious mind self-evidence at the same time: the flower, the body, the model of a seeing self, and even the global feature of wakefulness. For example, could the sound appearing in space by “recognizing itself,” or Huxley’s rose and iris and carnation continuously “signifying themselves,” actually be more than just examples of the phenomenology of nonconceptual self-disclosure that I have been trying to gesture at here? Are they literally states that try to sustain their existence in our brain, by continually producing fresh “evidence for their own existence,” *validating* the feeling of knowing?

In recent publications,<sup>9</sup> Hohwy has pointed out that there is a deep connection between self-evidencing and our consciously experienced sense of being (see chapter 27 for more). He has also suggested that if our goal is to understand conscious experience, a certain subset of self-evidencing properties tend to transpire as good explanations of why those properties are the way they are, including how they might not occur in creatures that we do not consider conscious. This is my point: Could the phenomenology of self-revealing suchness perhaps be much better described as the phenomenal character of *self-evidencing*, of what I have termed “epistemic self-validation”? If so, this insight could build a conceptual bridge to the best of current research on consciousness.

The notion of multiple self-evidencing states arising within a larger system may help us to see a new connection between descriptions of conscious experience and the computational level of analysis. Perhaps conscious representations are “epistemically

self-validating,” in the computational sense that every single conscious model (e.g., of a sound or of a flower), and not just “the brain” as a whole, is actually creating evidence for its own existence: Every conscious model predicts epistemic value plus its own future existence, and this fact is subtly reflected in its very phenomenal character. This would mean that normally such states simply “appear as real” (because they express a very high probability), but that in meditation, we sometimes have access to their deeper functional structure, to a recurrent and “loopy” process of local self-evidencing—but, as always, entirely without words and concepts. Zooming out further, the transition from physics to life can be characterized as an emergence of self-replicating structures, dynamical systems that create near-identical copies of themselves. Could it be the case that—in the long slow transitions from life to mind and onward to consciousness<sup>10</sup>—some representational states in biological nervous systems “come alive” because and so long as they continuously self-replicate (namely, by predicting their own knowability and future existence)? Returning to how best to understand an individual organism’s experience of suchness, however, the idea of locally self-evidencing perceptual states opens up a new perspective on the “mystical” Wittgensteinian qualities of self-presentation and self-manifestation that characterize it. And as we will see in chapter 28, this deeper form of introspection can sometimes create a phenomenology of translucency and virtuality (i.e., of things appearing as *neither* real *nor* unreal).

What’s more, perhaps this framework gives us a different take on what philosophers have in the past called “appearances”: as epistemically self-validating representations, dynamically self-evidencing models emerging in the nervous systems of some biological creatures, including models of knowing and wakefulness. Appearing would then be a continuously self-evidencing process that really only predicts its own internal states, but that has become so useful that it can be used as a model predicting a complex external stimulus source and the probability of knowledge possession itself. For example, if the stimulus source is an iris, then the self-evidencing iris-model makes the iris *appear* to the organism. The process presents evidence for itself; it discloses itself; it epistemically self-validates. Again, as in the quote from Wittgenstein, it *shows* itself and *manifests* at the same time.

This new way of describing the nature of consciousness also offers a deep connection to the new phenomenological concept of “nonegoic self-awareness,” to which we will return in chapter 29. On the level of statistical analysis, this concept relates to factor 8, which was called “Emptiness and Nonegoic Self-Awareness”: Pure awareness is often described by our meditators as something that actually knows itself. This may be one of the study’s most interesting results. I will not go into detail about this point here, but if you are feeling impatient, you may want to quickly return to figure 2.1 in

chapter 2, where you can see that the second- and third-strongest loading items in factor 8 were offering two metaphorical descriptions of first-order reflexivity, actually combining the “Self-Knowledge, Autonomous Cognizance, and Insight” of factor 3 and the “Wakefulness” of factor 4 with the phenomenal quality of emptiness and epistemic openness. In other words, we seem to find an empty form of self-cognizant wakefulness. Interestingly, these factors are negatively correlated with the phenomenology of selfhood: The phenomenology of self-knowing and self-awakening picked out by factor 8 is *nonegoic*, meaning that it has nothing to do with agency, control, the meditator’s personality traits, or her autobiographical narrative. Experiencing suchness may be directly related to perceiving from the perspective created by nonegoic self-awareness.

In suchness, too, there is an element of nonegoic self-awareness, but on the level of perceptual objects themselves.<sup>11</sup> However, if we pay real attention to the phenomenology, we find that the objects are already de-reified: They are no longer really objects. The dualistic prior assumptions that everything is *either* subject *or* object, that things are *either* sentient *or* insentient, and that no third possibility exists, begin to lose their grip on our phenomenology.

At the very beginning of this book, I claimed that, if we begin to take our own phenomenology more seriously, conscious awareness may not be a *subjective* phenomenon at all. You may already have noted that from this, it does not follow that conscious awareness is a purely *objective* phenomenon either. Our phenomenological data now begin to show what this could mean. According to some poetic descriptions, objects seem to be in a process of awakening to themselves. Recall the first passage from report #3160 presented earlier in this chapter: “that it is not a self that perceives the sound, but that there is awareness in/with the sound. There existed a perception that the sound appears in space with awareness and ‘recognizes itself.’” The first conclusion from phenomenological observations like these is that in describing suchness, we must do phenomenological justice to a strong aspect of reflexivity, as well as to a nonegoic signature of knowing. Second, suchness is related to an experiential attenuation of subject/object duality. Subject/object structure can itself be viewed as a filtering mechanism, which can be temporarily suspended in pure perception. For another concrete example, consider this part of a report that will be presented in full length in chapter 27 (#2780): “Everything was awareness. It was not that (for example) I saw a chair, but that awareness ‘happened’ in the form of a chair.”

Let us take stock of where we are now. The first element that I proposed as crucial for understanding the conscious experience of suchness and seeing *what is* was the phenomenal character of timeless change. Then we took a closer look at the experiential qualities of “self-disclosure” and “self-manifestation.” The third and final

phenomenological aspect of suchness that I highlighted in this chapter was “meaninglessness.” Let us take another look at this last aspect.

Earlier in the chapter, I briefly noted that “suchness” could refer to the very phenomenology of nonconceptuality itself. Meaninglessness need not be negative or repugnant; on the contrary, its phenomenology can have immense beauty and depth. If you look at a chair or at a carnation in a vase on the table in front of you with a crystal-clear, silent mind, without labeling or naming it in any way and without making any connections to past or future, then you may not even recognize it. Your mind is in a state of epistemic openness, but now the perceptual object is epistemically open as well because it has lost its predetermined conceptual essence. It is now open to an infinite number of different interpretations and possible perspectives. This is the infinity that the poet William Blake spoke of, and in rare moments, it can be consciously experienced by any of us.

Once we have understood that “meaninglessness” can be an entirely positive, even spiritual experience, we gain an unexpected new perspective on the old philosophical question about the “meaning” of life. What if your whole life were meaningless, but only in the very special sense described in this chapter? Could you perhaps look at yourself plus all of your life history as a large, self-revealing, ultimately selfless pattern of pure suchness, of events manifesting within a timeless space of awareness? Could you see the pattern as entirely meaningless in this sense, as neither good nor bad at all, but also thus see it as a pattern that is at times beginning to see *itself* in a much deeper and liberating way?

Back to nonconceptuality: What does it mean to say that suchness includes the very phenomenology of nonconceptuality itself? I think that there are two aspects. As we saw in chapter 4, to say that something is “epistemically open” also means that it has no essence, no intrinsic and predetermined meaning; that it possesses no label and no obvious canonical interpretation. It is *available*, but as something that can be seen from an infinite number of possible perspectives. My first point is that this infinity of epistemic possibilities has a phenomenal character of its own.

But there is a second aspect. What is more, “suchness” in this sense is not only an experience of nonconceptuality itself, but also one of *inconceivability*—that is, we see the actual fact of something being ineffable and possessing no intrinsic conceptual essence, and simultaneously we see the *impossibility* of ever bringing it “under” any conceptual form of thought. Its richness overwhelms the thinking mind. Put differently, “being beyond comprehension” is a distinct experiential quality of its own, and suchness includes that quality. It is not only the infinity that we feel, but a sense of impossibility, of unfathomable depth. This is my second point.



The phenomenology of perception while in a meditative state shows that these two qualities of infinity and inconceivability are something that can be directly experienced. Do you recall the beautiful metaphor at the beginning of this chapter, coined by one of the participants in our study? There are states of consciousness in which “openness touches openness.” In these states, in experiences of suchness, there is also a quality of freshness and wonder. Many of us may remember such states from childhood. One participant wrote: “I also had the feeling of seeing objects as if for the first time, with a renewed attention similar to that of children looking at things for the first time. I was not creating this situation. It simply happened for some reason, and I found myself in it” (#2543). As there is no conceptual overlay, the meaning is lost, there is a timeless moment in which the carnation is no longer perceived *as a carnation*. You do not recognize the perceptual object as that which it always was. But there is something else you see: an infinity of epistemic possibilities, the particularity of timeless self-disclosure in this very instance, the manifestation of self-sufficiency without substantiality, sheer inconceivability, the emptiness of appearances.

Or even a Last Judgment. From a certain theological perspective, the Last Judgment can be seen as the ultimate climax in the history of conscious experience, the point at which time ends and everything is finally seen as it really is, by a single Divine Mind, naked and in its entirety. Some meditators with religious beliefs might feel driven to impose this—or similar—frameworks onto their experience, as the only conceivable way to later make sense of it. The French philosopher, mystic, and political activist Simone Weil (1909–1943) said, “One has to be dead to be able to see things in their nakedness.”<sup>12</sup> If dying into pure experience is what some experiences of suchness feel like in retrospect, the process of coming back to life afterward is bound to be hard, or at least strange. For the meditator or the psychonaut following in the footsteps of Huxley, it may certainly be difficult to return to the prior state—it may be only “after a long time and with considerable difficulty” that you regain the ability to contract into a knowing self, to begin to think thoughts, to recognize the chair as a chair. Seeing suchness upends the constant process of meaning-making, and the emptiness of appearances is their utter meaninglessness. Liberated from meaning, they are self-ablaze, shining with their own inner light—epistemically open.

One final question is whether MPE *itself* carries the phenomenal character of suchness too. In other words, how exactly does all of this relate to the elephant, if at all? For the scholar, the issue may now become whether suchness is part of the elephant, or even a good candidate for “prototypical” elephanthood. For the active practitioner, all of this is interesting in a very different way. If, in the process of seeing *what is* without words and concepts, she has begun to gradually discover suchness in perceptual



objects, new targets begin to emerge for her—this time on the level of inner awareness, or introspective experience. If you are a practitioner, can you see the suchness in the process that is trying to meditate? But even if you are neither a scholar nor a practitioner, there now are fascinating questions to guide you in your own phenomenological investigation. Does your ordinary, innate experience of wakefulness (explored in chapter 4) actually possess the quality of suchness too? And what about the quality of “knowingness,” the experiential signature of knowing itself (chapters 7 and 18)? Just like wakefulness, it exists in the simple process of mindfully and choicelessly seeing *what is*; it naturally coemerges with it. Does knowingness have suchness too?



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# The Elephant and the Blind

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

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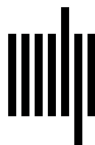
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