

## 16 Simplicity, Nothingness, and Absence

A lucid void [#105]

The certainty of having encountered NOTHINGNESS. [#108]

Unity and nothingness at once, perfectly balanced. [#1937]

One of the methodological background assumptions guiding the Minimal Phenomenal Experience (MPE) research project was that pure awareness might be the simplest form of conscious experience that human beings are capable of. From the first-person perspective of meditators, this intuitive assessment has been confirmed, as our data clearly show. But as we have already seen, there is much more to be said from a theoretical, third-person perspective. Let us begin with three examples of how meditators describe the phenomenology of simplicity:

1424 [. . .] It is a domain of complete silence. Simplicity. There is nothing that needs to be expressed, communicated, or evaluated. The very simplest being.

2372 A “moment without ingredients.”

3218 [. . .] The simplest state of awareness perfectly describes my experience. It IS utter simplicity, no complications whatsoever, easy and so natural as if things could not be any different, will not be any different, and have never been any different than this completely effortless flow of life and evolution. [. . .]

In some cases, practitioners describe deep MPE-like states as involving a paradoxical phenomenology of “nothingness,” which may involve everything “being” nothing, nothing remaining while everything *is*, or being a nothing that somehow isn’t *really* nothing. (You will discover close parallels with all three in chapter 26, when we investigate the experience of pure being more closely by looking at some descriptions by

medieval mystics.) Normally, such states will be concurrently ineffable: impossible to describe while they are happening, simply because they lack the distinction between self and world. Interestingly, what is later described as “nothingness” can also become the true self; it can function as what, in chapter 29, I have tried to describe more precisely as a “nonegoic unit of identification.” Here are three examples:

1788 [. . .] In a further, even deeper state I suddenly see that everything is pure “nothing.” This has a frightening effect on me to begin with, as well as being very liberating and absurdly funny, because “nothing” is the only thing that is. I myself am also nothing, have always been nothing, and I cannot lose anything, because there is nothing to lose. This is how I experience it in this state. The liberating and very pleasing thing is that I then “see” that what I really am cannot die, because it is always already this living nothing and there is nothing else. [. . .]

2441 I was pure me and everything at the same time, I was no more and knew that I am, in the deepest sense, who I am. Nothing. Nothing more remains, everything is. [. . .]

2544 The first time this happened it was very sudden—I suddenly recognized that I was nothing, nothing at all. And it was so obvious, yet I’d never noticed before. Nothing that’s not nothing though. Nothing as in being no sort of object or phenomenon whatsoever. Yet despite being nothing, I was here. I recognized that I’d always been here. I saw that I was what here is, and that I was what now is. I clearly saw that it’s never not now. It couldn’t possibly ever be other than now. I saw that, as nothing, I had never been harmed in any way, nor could I ever be. And when I say “I” I don’t mean the person. There was such profound peace and bliss. I didn’t move for some time. The body was utterly still, the mind was utterly still. All sensory perceptions were vivid. I didn’t want to move ever. But when I did get up to move I saw that I did not move. The ground moved underneath me and the trees passed by as I walked, but I did not move. Soon the emotion came, tears of joy flowing. I didn’t understand anything. I did not give it to the mind. The mind could not hold this.

In chapters 2 and 3, we saw how Eastern and Western philosophical traditions converge in suggesting that “low complexity” must be an essential semantic constraint for the concept of pure awareness.<sup>1</sup> Empirically, one may assume that the first-person simplicity of MPE should be reflected in third-person measures of brain complexity.<sup>2</sup> If subjective phenomenology is at all related to objective brain function, radical attenuation in functional complexity makes it plausible to assume that full-absorption episodes

sometimes border on a complete cessation of conscious experience. Our reports show that such episodes of pure awareness are minimally complex and undifferentiated (e.g., in that the phenomenal character of awareness in and of itself lacks all internal structure and temporal dynamics). There are also reports about experiences that weren't even "experiences" anymore, but rather states of utter annihilation and nothingness (see also chapter 31):

2788 First, there was no program anymore, then, there were only some bars, and finally, they disappeared leaving everything blank and no television anymore at all.

Some descriptions of phenomenal "nothingness" involve episodes of complete disorientation relative to time, space, and person, while others refer to a combination of nothingness and extreme wakefulness. Interestingly, some meditators even report prolonged "absences" for which there is no memory whatsoever—states perhaps vaguely reminiscent of petit mal seizures and the phenomenon of childhood or juvenile absence epilepsy. In some of humankind's contemplative traditions, this phenomenon is known as the attainment of "cessation" (*nirodha-samāpatti* or *saññā-vedayita-nirodha*), referring to a complete cessation of perception, thought, and feeling, an unconscious state in which not only all mental activity has been suspended but also the vital signs of most bodily functions are greatly attenuated.<sup>3</sup> In these very special situations, "pure awareness," "pure being," or "nondual unity" typically seems to occur just before or just after the episode proper. Let us take a look at five examples:

1908 It's difficult to describe, but I felt as if I was being sucked out of the world through a portal. Everything around me disappeared and I was left in a state of "nothingness" that felt, paradoxically, safe.

3431 [. . .] the impression emerges of getting very close to something fundamental, unbelievable, essential, which then in some way seems to elude direct consciousness. A kind of "consciousness swallows itself." Often combined with a feeling of sinking down, shrinking, or also falling or collapsing in on oneself, like a whirlpool (but slower) or an hourglass in the middle, or the drain of a bathtub, or as if something is being stuffed inside and disappearing at the same time. I don't know if this is what is meant by "pure awareness"; it feels more like "nothing." Some questions in the questionnaire, which asked e.g. whether the state was "positive" or "relaxed" or a "feeling of unity" or something like that, I couldn't answer at all or could only say no, because the state simply somehow didn't exist at all or was nothing at all . . . what these experiences—or rather, states—have in common is a kind of great amazement,

so to speak holding your breath or not breathing anymore and an immense “awake”ness. [. . .]

3136 After about thirty minutes of complete unconsciousness in an upright meditation posture, it took me several minutes before I knew again who and where I was. I landed in a state of consciousness of boundless, stable peacefulness that seemed indestructible and continued even when I got up and walked home. Everything external seemed far away and could not harm my state of “pure being.”

3323 [. . .] However, later on there were more “experiences” in which the very last remnant of this pure consciousness in meditation was extinguished. This was like an inner death, but then also an even greater freedom than pure consciousness itself. There it was clearly experienced that pure consciousness is far from being the deepest possible (or highest possible) thing, but that “behind” it there exists a much more extensive, indescribable “not-anything.” But it cannot be described in words, since it is no longer an experience; rather, it can at most be described as the absence of all experience, or as absolute freedom.

3348 [. . .] I did one morning decide to have my only meal of the day outside [. . .]. I sat on a rock near a pond. It must have been around 11.00 in the morning. I remember realizing how the dragonfly that hovered over the pond and the rock I was sitting on were one and the same. Next, the bell for evening meditation rang. It was 5.00 in the afternoon . . . my meal untouched . . . the body felt strange, yet free and open. Many of these sensationless [states] have followed since. While initially it was followed by a fear of dissolving . . . today the body is used to it and somehow knows it will return to the world as we know it.

Could there be islands of pure awareness for which there is no memory whatsoever? Some of the reports presented here point to the empirical possibility of what I will call “mnemonic closure”: It is conceivable that there are MPE states that never can or will be reported—states that may from the outside appear to be a complete absence, an episodic loss of consciousness, or simply a “passing-out” during meditation. But they might actually be states of consciousness. Plausibly, states that are “closed” to any form of personal memory in this way would appear in the context of full-absorption episodes as described in this book. Proving their existence would demonstrate that the functional property of “availability for personal-level memory recall” is not a necessary element of our minimal model of what consciousness really is.

The possibility that awareness may persist in fully disconnected cortical islands has recently begun to fascinate philosophers and neuroscientists alike because the discovery of islands of awareness would have important implications for debates about the

nature of consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Future research into MPE and meditation, therefore, could contribute to our understanding of the conditions under which such islands might arise and the forms might they take.

### Simplicity and Profundity

You can come upon your relationship to this nothingness and its fear only by being choicelessly aware of the escapes. [ . . . ] You and nothingness are one; you and nothingness are a joint phenomenon, not two separate processes. [ . . . ] When there is the discovery, the experiencing of that nothingness as you, then fear—which exists only when the thinker is separate from his thoughts and so tries to establish a relationship with them—completely drops away.

—Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986), *Commentaries on Living*

In chapter 12, when investigating descriptions of pure awareness as “the most natural state,” we discovered that what makes the phenomenal character of MPE so hard to express in words may be the combination of profundity and simplicity. One could certainly imagine that some random person to whom MPE is directly pointed out might briefly feel their way into it but see only the simplicity and not the profundity, shrug their shoulders, and walk away. There could be experience without recognition because in a sense, MPE is natural and unnatural at the same time.

One may speculate that MPE could be the baseline of all experience, as well as the critical boundary between conscious experience and its cessation. If so, it would be quite plausible that MPE could sometimes alternate with states of actual unconsciousness. When we investigated the phenomenology of wakefulness in chapter 4, I introduced the idea of an “alertness *Ganzfeld*.” Did you know that staring at an undifferentiated and uniform field of color for some time will make you see black or go temporarily blind?<sup>5</sup> It is well known that seeing only one single and undifferentiated chromatic stimulus eventually leads to the experience of seeing blackness or of being blind. Vision scientists call this the “*Ganzfeld* effect” or “perceptual deprivation.” It turns out that color “qualia” are not context-invariant atoms of conscious experience at all. Perhaps the same is true of my hypothetical alertness *Ganzfeld*, and if so, this may explain some episodes of unconsciousness. If the whole phenomenal field is uniformly filled by pure wakefulness, then some people might not simply “see black” but go blind altogether; they might not experience sheer nothingness, but instead lose conscious experience altogether. Perhaps the term “white-out” would be a better label for this admittedly speculative hypothesis.

In any case, there may be interesting relationships connecting MPE and what is later reported as a loss of all subjective experience. If pure awareness is functionally related

to the critical borderlands where consciousness ceases altogether, then one would also predict that people who have learned to *recognize* the phenomenal character of MPE become aware of it at the edges of sleep: when going to bed and when emerging from deep sleep in the morning. Interestingly, new research is now beginning to document the conscious experience of “nothingness” even during dreamless deep sleep.<sup>6</sup>

In the existing literature, phenomenological reports of MPE often point to a combination of wakefulness and simplicity. The following example adds two important aspects—the qualities of “self-sufficiency” and “intimacy”:

When I experience pure consciousness, it is a state in which I am awake and aware, but not aware of anything except awareness itself. As I merge into the experience, outer-relatedness lessens and inner peace and self-sufficiency remains. It is not an intellectual experience. It is by far the most intimate and simple experience in my life.<sup>7</sup>

The experiential quality of self-sufficiency relates to experiences of soundness (chapter 7) and naturalness (chapter 12), but most obviously to the phenomenology of “coming home” and what was figuratively described (in chapters 13 and 14) as “There is nothing left to do.” We encountered the phenomenal character of self-intimacy when investigating the quality of connectedness in chapter 11, and we will briefly encounter it again in chapters 29 and 30, when looking at the “True Self” and the discovery of nonegoic self-awareness. For now, let’s stay with the phenomenology of simplicity itself.

In item #84 of our study, we asked participants to rate their agreement with the statement “The experience of ‘pure awareness’ is the simplest kind of conscious experience I know.” The median level of agreement with this statement was 80 (on a scale from 0 to 100). This result seems to confirm my original intuition that the phenomenology of pure awareness is a good place to start in the search for a minimal model of consciousness. If, as scientists and philosophers, we do eventually want to formulate a first “standard model of consciousness” using the formal language of mathematics (by analogy with the Standard Model of particle physics, which is theoretically self-consistent and has been extremely successful in providing testable predictions), then the concept of MPE will have to be central.

Why is that? For us, MPE—that is, consciousness per se—is the *intended interpretation* of any purely mathematical description because what we really want to know is what the property of consciousness itself consists in. Finding this interpretation is what motivates our search for the standard model of consciousness. Any purely formal model needs an interpretation that creates a link between symbols, on one hand, and certain

states or functions in the real world, on the other. We want our model of consciousness to be factually true, a nonarbitrary interpretation, with empirical reality itself eventually becoming the model of our theory. For consciousness, this may be a few decades away. But at the very least, investigating the phenomenology of “awareness itself” will generate great heuristic fecundity because it changes our theoretical intuitions, makes us think about things in a new way, and gives us a fresh angle on the problem of consciousness. That fresh angle consists in the fact that we are now looking at it from neither the first-person perspective of subjective, personal experience nor the third-person perspective of a large scientific community. Instead, we are uniting both approaches by finally taking the “zero-person perspective” seriously (see chapters 3 and 29).

Meditators have been adopting the zero-person perspective for many centuries. To be sure, people have all kinds of complex reasons for practicing meditation, and it is perfectly fine to do it in an experimental spirit or out of sheer curiosity, for its therapeutic benefits, or to improve one’s quality of life. But here we are taking a philosophical stance on it. From a more radical, philosophical perspective, meditation really has nothing do with well-being, stress reduction, or self-optimization; it is a special form of epistemic practice. It is about insight, about gaining knowledge. Epistemic practices like science and philosophy tend to be engaged in through language, via books, concepts, arguments, and theories. They are socially organized, they depend on personal-level interactions between members of a group, and they are concerned with assessing and legitimizing knowledge claims. Meditation is a very different kind of epistemic practice. The sought-after form of insight occurs in silence, entirely without words. It often takes place in a social context, but being able to make public verbal statements of knowledge after the fact is not one of its essential features or goals.

Radical meditation is an epistemic practice, just as philosophy and science are. This means that meditation is aimed at insight, at the creation of knowledge—but a very specific kind of knowledge that has nothing to with words, concepts, or theories. Rather, a central goal of meditation practice is an entirely silent and nonconceptual form of *nonegoic self-knowledge* (chapters 29 and 30). Like any practice, it can be abused, and in chapter 17, we will take a careful look at two of the most important ways in which this can happen: narrative self-deception and mortality denial. Drugs can be abused, and so can meditation. Viewed from the more radical philosophical perspective that I take in this book, contemplative practice cannot be reduced to some banal form of self-help or self-improvement, nor to a neoliberal form of self-pacification that serves to stabilize the status quo of woke consumer capitalism. It is also not a form of media consumption that you engage in through headphones. These would all be examples of what I call “meditation abuse.”

The epistemic practice of meditation critically depends on something that cannot be faked or commodified, something that Immanuel Kant, in his 1793 work *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*,<sup>8</sup> called the “the sincere intention of being honest towards oneself” (more on this in the epilogue). Precisely because it is a *genuinely* epistemic practice, one that needs sincerity and honesty, real meditation practice is not something that can ever be turned into an individualistic lifestyle accoutrement to make people “mentally fit” and resilient, and thus help them keep functioning within an economic system that is about to destroy the planet. Rather, it is directly and intimately related to what philosophers since the time of Socrates have called the project of “living an examined life”—but, as already explained, in a way that has nothing to do with words, thoughts, or theories. Nonconceptually seeing the world and what one previously took to be oneself, in and out of MPE, is what this epistemic practice is all about, and this is also what it means to take on the zero-person perspective. Yet no one is doing the taking; it is more like effortlessly stepping out of the picture. The zero-person perspective has existed all along, and we can view it as a selfless mode of knowing in its own right. But what is known? Shen-Hui (684–758), a student of Hui Neng, said: “Seeing into nothingness—this is true seeing and eternal seeing.”<sup>9</sup> According to Suzuki, Shen-Hui proclaimed that “seeing into one’s nature” is “seeing into nothingness.”<sup>10</sup>

One might now begin to speculate that pure awareness may be a nonlinguistic epistemic modality, a fundamental computational principle, a nondual “data format” that has naturally evolved in biological brains, providing us with an aperspectival form of nonpersonal knowledge of the world in itself (like level 4 in figure 34.1 in chapter 34). The zero-person perspective could be what envelops and permeates the first-person perspective, making it conscious in the first place. Is this where the profundity comes from? Is it that we feel the underlying unity of the third- and first-person perspectives, but nonconceptually, not as some intellectual construct but as what awareness itself really is? The idea sounds exciting—perhaps even slightly romantic. However, in beginning to think about the zero-person perspective, we need to apply the highest standards of intellectual honesty and stay as conceptually clear as possible. It is just too important not to.

In the spirit of remaining clear and honest, it’s crucial to acknowledge that “simplicity” is only a phenomenal quality—just as redness, greenness, and sweetness are—and that the statistical fact about a median of 80 for the agreement mentioned earlier does not in any way prove that we have actually found the simplest state of consciousness that human beings are capable of. There may be even simpler ones. Just think of the possibility of “islands of awareness,” which I touched on at the very end of the



preceding section. Perhaps we all have ultrashort flickers of awareness during dreamless deep sleep, which we never remember and therefore never report to each other? Together with the dream researcher Tore Nielsen, the philosophers Jennifer Windt and Evan Thompson asked whether consciousness really disappears in dreamless deep sleep. Not only did they identify “selfless” states and contentless sleep experiences (which we will carefully investigate in chapter 20) as possible candidates for dreamless-sleep consciousness, but they also found a variety of phenomenal states that are not dreams at all, such as nonimmersive imagery and sleep thinking, as well as perceptual experiences and bodily sensations lacking the simulational character of dreaming. On the basis of these findings, they call for an entirely new taxonomy of dreamless sleep experience.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, future research may demonstrate that even less complex forms of phenomenal character than MPE in meditation exist, and they constitute the simplest form of conscious experience that neurotypical human beings are capable of. Empirically, it clearly remains an open question what the very simplest form of conscious experience really is.

Conceptual issues are just as important as the empirical question of whether meditation-related MPE is the simplest form of consciousness. First, it is essential that we avoid conflating subjective ratings of “simplicity” with whatever objective measures we may develop in the future. It may feel highly intuitive to claim that a state of consciousness is “the simplest kind of conscious experience we know,” but doing so raises a host of thorny philosophical issues. The criteria for minimality, or for whatever else we decide the word “simple” really means, will have to be developed by philosophers, mathematicians, and the interdisciplinary community of consciousness researchers. For example, if we opt for a state-space model of consciousness, simplicity might be defined in terms of dimensionality or the volume in phenomenal state space inhabited by pure-awareness experiences, or quite likely some other, more complicated mathematical construct. But how do we get to the dimensions of phenomenal state space themselves? The ninety-two items of our first MPE-92M survey, which led to the twelve statistical dimensions derived from them, were defined by questions that a limited number of human beings (mostly myself, my coauthor Alex Gamma, and the many wonderful participants in our pilot studies) selected on the basis of their own phenomenal experience. This is one methodological option, but there are many others.

Do you remember the fable of the elephant and the blind? The blind people were guided to the elephant by the king’s loyal subjects, all of them sighted people. What if they had chosen different blind people to invite? Why should precisely *these* questions and dimensions help us carve out what pure consciousness “really is”? Is the experience of pure awareness a natural element like gold or silver, or an element like

plutonium or meitnerium? Is what we mean by the working concept of MPE ultimately something that—like “electron” or “tau neutrino”—reflects the structure of the natural world, not the personal goals, interests, and actions of human beings? Will the experience of pure awareness be the same for all sentient beings in the universe that can have it? We simply do not know yet, but tentative recent evidence begins to speak against it.<sup>12</sup> In a philosophical sense, one perfectly possible result is that we may ultimately find that there is no intrinsic essence to consciousness at all. Consciousness, too, may prove to be empty.

Ultimately, “MPE” is a cluster concept that refers to a phenomenological prototype. This implies that there may be no set of necessary and sufficient conditions that allow us to say whether some minimal or extremely simple representational state is conscious. Rather, “consciousness” itself refers to states, regions, and trajectories in a multidimensional space constituted by functional and content-related dimensions; it is a graded and heterogeneous construct, and membership comes in degrees.<sup>13</sup> The underlying dimensions that give structure to the space of conscious experience create a complex pattern of family resemblances, and absolute orderings may not be possible in all cases. Different embodied beings will open up different spaces of experience because they will have different brains, live in different sociocultural contexts, and have different ways of accessing their individual phenomenal space. This means that our blind people may never fully agree about the family of animals in front of them. There will be degrees of prototypicality because highly prototypical members of our family have attributes that overlap with most other examples of the category, while low-prototypicality members have little overlap. Membership of the family of phenomenal states, therefore, will be graded. But careful quantitative assessments of prototypicality may actually help us understand why some phenomenological exemplars capture the intuitive “essence” of consciousness better than others. What *could* be common to many different conscious beings, for example, is the underlying experience of epistemic openness discussed in chapter 4; this is because it directly reflects the degree of wakefulness.

Epistemic openness could be a fundamental part of consciousness even (or especially) for conscious beings that are not yet born. We all probably dream a lot before being born because in the course of fetal development, rapid eye movement (REM) sleep may constitute up to 80 percent of total sleep time.<sup>14</sup> I predict that the fascinating concept of “fetal consciousness” will soon move to center stage in consciousness research because important markers of phenomenal experience, like the capacity for second-order learning, are now being discovered in unborn human infants.<sup>15</sup> Anatomical development during the fetal period also indicates that the neural networks probably necessary for conscious processing are established around week 25 of gestation

before birth. This raises the question of whether the pure-awareness experience might actually be the first conscious experience that every human being has in the womb. We should keep this possibility in mind: If MPE really is minimal, then it is plausible to assume that it might also be primary. It may be the *first* phenomenal state that all of us ever experience, even if we cannot remember it after birth. Emptiness—the silent, clear, and nondual experience of becoming epistemically open to the world—would then be the first conscious experience every sentient being actually has.

Let me close by giving one last example of what in chapter 12 I introduced as the “C-fallacy,” this time applying our new conceptual tool to the phenomenology of simplicity. Of course, from the fact that something *appears as* and is later *described as* maximally simple from a first-person perspective, it doesn’t follow that we have *really* found the simplest form of human consciousness. The fetal experience of pure awareness could be even simpler. To briefly return to the earlier example, empirically, there might be ultrabrief “flickers of awareness” with fine-grained content that nobody ever remembers or reports because these micromoments occur only during dreamless phases of nocturnal sleep—or even during normal wakefulness. Or there could be even simpler states in pathological conditions, such as borderline cases of bare wakefulness following severe brain injury, while slowly recovering from a weeklong coma, or in the process of waking from anaesthesia. Recall the E-fallacy too (chapter 7): from the fact that some conscious experience subjectively feels like an epistemic state, or that it is later described as carrying the phenomenal signature of knowing, it does not follow that it actually presents us with an insight into reality. Inner experience, in all its depth and beauty, is one thing, but public statements and strong theoretical claims need independent justification. They are not part of the epistemic practice of meditation itself.

I think the same skeptical point applies to the simplicity of pure awareness. A lot depends on our defining criteria for the phenomenological concept of “simplicity.” Therefore, the question “What is the simplest kind of conscious experience?” cannot be answered by decree, by spiritual teachers restating the phenomenological taxonomies of time-honored contemplative traditions, or by the authoritative representatives of some religious system reiterating that religion’s metaphysical precepts. Rather, this question is an open target for research. It is a philosophical, a conceptual, and a methodological question—and an important one. We simply do not know the answer yet.



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# The Elephant and the Blind

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

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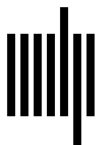
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