

18 Luminosity

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The kinds of phenomenal character sometimes described as “luminosity,” “radiance,” or even “enlightenment” come in many varieties. To give the two most important examples: Many practitioners describe a nonperceptual phenomenology of “clear light,” or more general clarity and epistemic openness, while others report a more visual form of brightness, which can be experienced with closed as well as open eyes. It is quite possible that we are dealing with fundamentally different phenomena here, and that some reports about luminosity of the second type are actually self-fulfilling prophecies caused by taking light metaphors too literally. I will let you judge for yourself. For simplicity’s sake, I have created two major subsections for reports referring to this specific aspect of the pure-awareness experience.¹

We could label the first type of experience “luminous emptiness”:

48 My experience occurred during a Douglas Harding “Tube experiment.” My end was perfectly colorless, empty, boundless, and yet aware. The emptiness was luminous. There was a strong sense that the other’s face was my own (like looking in a mirror) and a deep sense of tenderness and gratitude for that face.
1311 [. . .] Almost impossible to describe, because the word “experiences” actually misses the point completely. The closest would be like a boundless space of awareness without center or edge, radiating out of itself, which is completely empty of anything identifiable but at the same time also extremely concrete, full of objectless love, and very close, intimate, and also extremely “normal.” I say “is” and not “was” because this “space”/ “state” in which I “was” or which I am is exactly the same every time, without any variation, and in this point

also completely different from psychedelic drug or other mystical experiences [. . .].

1364 [. . .] It is inevitably very hard to describe the sensation in words, but I would best describe it as opening my eyes while my eyes were closed, or opening my eyes underwater. A sudden perfect clarity of experience. Pure awareness, yes, but fuller than that—a brightness unrelated to color/light is another good expression! Awareness unclouded by thought or sense information, but not without this information either. Not negative, positive, or neutral.

3628 [. . .] There was a feeling of energy, nonvisual brightness, unity and expansiveness. The perception of time was diminished, as I was not trying to cognize or estimate time. [. . .]

The second type of report refers to “luminosity” as a more clearly visual form of experiential content, with its phenomenal character therefore more related to one specific sensory modality. We could label it “quasi-perceptual luminosity” or “concrete enlightenment.” In type-2 phenomenological reports employing the concept of luminosity, I found more concrete descriptions, referring to visual experiences of pure brightness or radiance, of “milky” or “shimmering” light, sometimes accompanied by sensations of warmth. These experiences are not timeless or transcendental in the sense of being “always already the same” (see chapters 22 and 31); they often seem to be much more like processes unfolding over time. Of course, it may be possible that luminous emptiness leads to visual luminosity or vice versa, that they mingle, or that they are stages of one and the same process:

199 I spontaneously had the feeling of “floating” through a gate made of light.

There was nothing there but warm, bright light. My person / my body no longer existed, everything was just light. An indescribable lightness and silence flowed around me. No constant circling of thought, but eternal, timeless calm. . . .

1183 [. . .] then with the mind quietened down, was aware of the movement in and out of clear light either as light or as vibration expanding at the heart. I also found that the awareness would move from spacious clear light to focused (closed) clear light when aware of thoughts arising. [. . .] Later in the day was aware of the dominant sense, visual thought becoming or triggering the clear light (in contrast to the recessive (hearing thought)). Again there is no difference between the energies (or the feel of them) of thought and clear light—there is the basic difference in spaciousness, but when moving from still clear light to the thought clear light there is also a spaciousness about it, as it is the focus of the awareness at the time—there is nothing else at that point but the clear light of the thought—the only clear light at that instant.

[. . .] After a while the mind became still and very brightly luminous (clear light). Opening an eyelid and found that it was still fairly dark—just laughed from surprise as it was just like daylight behind the lids! Continued exercise of breathing into the heart and radiating the breath now as light through and out of the pores of the body. As the breathing progressed, the breath turned fully to light passing to the heart and throughout the body until the whole body was radiating light. Again, a shimmering luminous clear light radiating through the body expanding on the bright clear light from before but occupying the whole body and surroundings. The “light” breath became slower and slower as the shimmering luminosity filled and radiated from the boundary-less body. Opening the eyes to the whole surroundings bathed in shimmering luminous clear light. The shimmering clear light slowly receded to the body as still clear light with everything retained as a blissful clarity.

1312 [. . .] during which I had more and more the feeling or perception of reaching pure consciousness, that is, a consciousness without specific content, simply just consciousness. At some point I had the feeling “now,” that is, of having arrived in pure consciousness. [. . .] The state of mind I was in at that time I would describe as “milky” or “soft white mist.” So there was an aspect of inner brightness there, along with the awareness of being in silent, pure consciousness.

1575 [. . .] Brightness with eyes closed and intense warmth, both neither really inside nor outside (in the body). “But is that ‘pure awareness’?,” asks the thinking mind, and something else simply knows it.

1728 [. . .] Immediately after turning awareness upon itself it feels complete, blissful, and somewhat magnetically absorbing. It has a strong “visual” quality of radiance and shining, rejoicing. Although it feels entirely complete in itself, paradoxically, simultaneously there is some sense of someone noticing all the qualities or enjoyment in it, and some residue of a sense of beholding it rather than looking entirely from it.

2747 [. . .] Experience during a 10-day dark retreat: pure consciousness, bright, clear, connected with the experience of inner light—like in a dream—but not in sleep, instead during waking meditation in the darkness. [. . .]

2867 [. . .] Usually I sit with eyes slightly open but suddenly I became aware that my eyes were closed but it was very bright; I felt heavy and warm and expanded, and expanding. Totally at peace and still; breathing happened for me, to me—I was breathed. I was everything at once, all encompassing, and nothing at all, no form and no shape. Brightness and density and utter calm. [. . .]

3295 [. . .] I had the indescribably beautiful experience of perceiving only light in space, of which I myself was a part. [. . .]

3525 [. . .] a white light spread from the crown of the head over the whole body. A state of deep calm, peace, and absolute love followed. I could hear the sounds around me, but at the same time I was completely centered and in myself.

3565 It was a feeling of merging with my surroundings, becoming one, not being separated anymore. It was a very beautiful feeling. A feeling of lightness, being filled with warmth and positive energy, love, connectedness. Inner brightness.

3516 [. . .] A bright appearance of light shining from within, which shuts down all thoughts and ways of looking at what is happening. It is like sitting on a big beanbag or throne; the body sits on this throne of a ball of light, and you (whatever it is that is doing the perceiving) look out. It is not really possible to look inside, but from there the light goes out. The relaxation is very deep, so deep that the inner verbalization/dialogue also stops. The speech apparatus (larynx, throat . . .) is very relaxed, loose, and still. Due to the very deep relaxation there is also no impulse to question one's own feeling of self (like "Who am I?," "Where am I?"), so that different areas of the body, which otherwise in everyday life answer as "I," relax and widen. This results in the experience of an open tube along the spine, which opens wider and wider from the neck down. At the same time, the jaw and mouth area relax. The light sometimes becomes very bright, then every consideration or contemplation, even about these aspects of experience, disappears; for brief moments there is only light. If it gets a little weaker, I know that I am fully present; the thing is that it can just get "like too much," and then everything disappears within it. [. . .]

It remains unclear whether the two phenomenologies—we could perhaps call them "abstract enlightenment" and "concrete enlightenment"—are in any way systematically related. However, it is worth recalling that the English term "enlightenment" originated in the (often criticized) translation of the abstract noun *bodhi* as *Erleuchtung* by the German scholar Max Müller (1823–1900) in 1857. The verbal root *budh-* means "to awaken," and its literal meaning is closer to a continuous process—namely, the process of gradually waking—than to a sudden event. There is also no semantic element of luminosity in *bodhi*, the Buddhist original. In addition, we should never forget that epistemological metaphors of light, illumination, and enlightenment have played a role in countless other systems of philosophy and religion, both Western and Eastern.² Practitioners in different traditions and geographical regions, therefore, will use different terminologies and accordingly have different expectations, which in turn will

shape the experiences and the ways in which they are reported. For example, what originally was a more concrete experience of quasi-perceptual brightness (e.g., an abstract form of visual mental imagery with closed eyes) may be falsely reported as “clear light” by some—and vice versa.

Empty Cognizance

The Seer is nothing but the power of seeing which, although pure,
appears to see through the mind.

—Patanjali, *Yoga Sūtra* (II: 20)

Some people compare this cognizance to a radiant “thing” that shines with a light like a “clear light.” It means a sense of being wakeful, a quality of being vividly wide awake, which is empty of any identity, and naturally alert.

—Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche (1920–1996), *As It Is*, II.

Let us begin by looking at some results from our survey. Under our twelve-factor interpretation, factor 6 (“Luminosity”) referred to reports about pure awareness involving nonvisual phenomenal qualities of “brightness,” “radiance,” and “nontactile vibrancy,” but also to the visual experience of brightness with closed eyes. It was remarkable to see how this specific cluster of items turned out to be highly stable across all the factor solutions that we tested. Plausibly, the relevant experiential qualities are intimately connected. From a statistical perspective, another interesting detail was the correlation between factor 6 and factor 10 (which we dubbed “Touching World and Self”). There also was a correlation with “Peace, Bliss, and Silence” (factor 2; see chapter 2), but this was almost to be expected. Factor 10, on the other hand, describes minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) as an abstract form of tactile experience resembling self-touch (e.g., the specific sensation of intermanual self-touch, such as when you touch one of your hands with the other), or involving the entire body touching the world while simultaneously being touched by it (more on this in chapters 24 and 25). Other phenomenological descriptors in factor 10 are “velvety,” “dense,” and “full”—but always in a nontactile way (i.e., lacking the concrete phenomenal qualities normally characterizing the stimulus-correlated sense of touch).

At the intersection of factors 6 and 10, the experience of pure consciousness is described in three main ways: (1) as an abstract form of contact or of “being in touch”; (2) as possessing the phenomenal character of reflexivity (as found in self-touch); and (3) in globalized form, as “an experience of pure awareness penetrating your body,

e.g., like a field that also penetrates all other objects and living things” (item #87). The correlation of factors 6 and 10 is not intuitively obvious. There seems to be no direct phenomenological relationship between qualities like “brightness,” “brilliance,” or “radiance” and the touch-related ones just mentioned. If future studies replicate this result, then that might point to interesting commonalities in the neural substrate.

In his work on advanced Vipassanā meditators, the Israeli researcher Yochai Ataria describes a primordial phenomenological structure that we experience (e.g., when one of our hands touches the other). He calls it the “touching–touched structure,” in which we have a concrete tactile experience “of being a subject (touching) and an object (being touched) at the same time.”³ Please note that normally, both aspects of any such experience of self-touch will also be represented at the same location within the organism’s spatial frame of reference, and therefore the experience can help a human infant (or even a fetus) to consolidate the boundaries of its conscious body-model as motor development progresses.⁴ In self-touch, there is a spatiotemporal redundancy linking proprioceptive and tactile information, which can help the brain to build its model of reality.

In general, the boundary between subject and object is experienced in a clear and simple manner. In meditation, however, the boundary between the world and the knowing self may be gradually weakened as more and more boundaries begin to disappear,⁵ turning a more holistic quality of awareness per se into the dominant feature of the phenomenal field. In the tradition of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), Ataria points out that a body-based perspective allows us to gain an interesting new angle on the maximally simple and “primitive” experiential relations in which an organism can stand to the world it is embedded in. I think this new perspective may have far-reaching implications for our understanding of conscious world-experience: If we use the epistemic practice of meditation to look more closely at the fine structure of such experiential relations, are they really an abstract form of touching *ourselves*? Will we discover that world-experience always already is self-experience because a wide-open, effortless form of mindful attention, one that encompasses the whole phenomenal field, is really a way for the organism to selflessly *touch itself*? I think that our new phenomenological data clearly show that even the touching of attention by attention itself is possible: We can even direct our own attention to attention itself, perhaps to the wandering of its focal point, to the feeling of recognition becoming more precise, or to the pure capacity of being attentive itself—and then let go. Building on the existing technical term of “meta-attention,” we might speak here of “meta-attentional self-touch” (see also figure 34.1 in chapter 34).

If we now combine Yochai Ataria's point about the touching–touched structure with the contraction principle introduced in chapter 8, then an interesting phenomenological prediction arises: There should be states characterized by an entirely *uncontracted* version of the primordial touching–touched structure. Please recall that the contraction principle says that “being conscious” or “appearing” is really a property of a whole world-model in the brain, while the brain usually portrays “being conscious” as a property of *you*, contracting it into the transparent self-model, the image of a conscious person. If the person-model goes, what the brain does with “being conscious” may change. Meditation practice sometimes can decompress or “uncontract” consciousness, as it were, making *everything* appear to be pervaded by a quality of pure awareness. Could meditation do the same for the touching–touched structure? This new idea seems to be in agreement with Ataria's way of treating the problem. He writes:

Thus it is possible to describe the touching–touched structure in terms of touching (and being touched by) the whole world and not a specific object. With this in mind, we can describe the experience of knowing without a clear object (knowing it is happening without an object, or without a specific object) as a thin touching–touched structure in which one feels immersed within, yet at the same time also somewhat separate from, the world (Ataria, 2014a). While touching the world itself (and not a specific object), this sense of touching/being-touched becomes so diffuse that it does not generate an SB [*a sense of boundaries*; TM], yet nevertheless a very thin sense of touching/being-touched continues to exist.⁶

This possibility is directly related to the phenomenology of “bodiless body-experience” and the new notion of “abstract embodiment” to be introduced in chapter 24, but likely also to the experience of “connectedness” investigated in chapter 11. If Ataria is right, then “even when lacking a sense of boundary, some basic bodily feelings and a very liquid touching/being-touched structure continue to exist.”⁷

The possibility of a touching–touched structure persisting even when the subject/object structure collapses also relates to the Low Complexity (PC2) constraint, which says that pure awareness is extremely simple, lacking almost all internal structure: There should be simple and undifferentiated situations in which the touching–touched structure is attenuated but does not disappear altogether. In such cases, it would remain an *uncontracted* experiential quality, no longer bound into a conscious self-model. The touching–touched structure has a bodily origin in the sense of touch, but in this context, it would no longer be confined to the spatial boundaries of the physical body. In this sense, it would be ownerless. This potential independence from bodily spatiality in turn might underlie many of the experiential reports on “nondual being” that will

be presented in chapter 26. In the words of Ataria: “In this situation the subject and the world return to exist on the same level—they are both constituted by the same flesh.”⁸

In shifting from a phenomenological back to a semantic perspective, we find that “Self-Luminosity” (PC3) was one of the six semantic constraints for the concept of “pure awareness” that I extracted from a selection of canonical texts before developing the survey. In these texts, “Self-Luminosity” may also be found as the phenomenology of “brilliance” or as the “clear light of primordial awareness.” Here is a first empirical falsification of one of my hypotheses: Hinting at the possibility of cultural variance, I claimed that as opposed to Wakefulness and Low Complexity, Self-Luminosity is not often found in Western phenomenological reports.⁹ Our first survey shows that many meditators in Western Europe and the US do report this type of experience; it may, therefore, be more culturally *invariant* than I originally thought. The question remains which of its subcomponents will turn out to be prototypical—if you like, which will remain as stable elements of the common phenomenological denominator for pure awareness. My prediction is that it will be what earlier in this chapter I provisionally termed “abstract enlightenment.”

People have thought about this before. According to classical Buddhist teachings, the term “luminosity” (*prabhāsvaratā* in Sanskrit) is directly related to the radiance of consciousness itself and to the notion of the “luminous mind,” also translated as the “brightly shining mind” or “mind of clear light.” Here is one classical example taken from the *Bardo Thödol*, the “Tibetan Book of the Dead” (eighth century CE):

This brilliant emptiness is the radiant essence of your own awareness. It is beyond substance, beyond characteristics, beyond colour. [. . .] The instant of your own presence is empty, yet it is not a nihilistic emptiness, but unimpeded radiance, brilliant and vibrant. [. . .] Your own awareness, a vast luminous expanse, clarity inseparable from emptiness, is also the Buddha of unchanging light, beyond birth and death. Just to perceive this is enough. If you recognize this brilliant essence of your own awareness as Buddha Nature, then gazing into it is to abide in the state of enlightenment.¹⁰

We find here the aspects of radiance, brilliance, and vibrancy, the elements of clarity and vastness—all of them confirmed by our meditators. But if, as proposed in chapter 4, we read “emptiness” as “epistemic openness,” then at its core, it refers to an entirely nonconceptual experience of *epistemic capacity*, the capacity to know and experience (in Tibetan, *salwa*¹¹). In this new context, we could also speak of the uncontracted phenomenology of epistemic clarity (chapter 5), representing a currently unobstructed inner *space of knowing*, a space in which we can orient ourselves, in which perceptual

processes can unfold, in which attention can be controlled and focused, or in which concepts can be formed and applied to experience. If this space is empty, then no such processes are currently taking place. The mere potential, our own capacity to harbor such processes, is now experienced *as such*. This emptiness is a timeless, high-level phenomenological invariant that we could also describe as a statistical hypothesis—namely, the abstract belief that “something can be known.”

Another appropriate Western descriptor for luminosity (in the sense of consciously and nonconceptually experiencing epistemic capacity *per se*) could be “lucidity.” This term implies that one can possess the capacity in question without consciously knowing it at all, or that one could have a merely intellectual understanding (i.e., in the form of propositional, high-level thought) of the fact that one possesses this capacity, while at the same time entirely lacking a more direct, nonconceptual *awareness* of one’s capacity to know. Lacking this awareness, a given state would not be lucid. We can be entirely unaware of the space of knowing, but sometimes a global model of this space itself may begin to emerge—the global availability of information itself becomes globally available. MPE seems to be characterized by exactly this: an effortlessly occurring and nonconceptual representation of epistemic capacity, not reified, uncompressed, and uncontracted into any object of knowledge or a knowing self (chapter 25), but generating a specific experiential quality that can be described as “lucidity,” “luminosity,” “brightness,” or “clarity.” Phenomenologically, this feature is the spontaneous self-disclosure of an unobstructed epistemic space. Alluding to ancient Buddhist terminology, we might also call it “empty cognizance.”

Let us now return from the broader semantics of concepts like “MPE” and “luminosity” to our own qualitative perspective. As noted previously, and as described in the second group of reports in section 1 of this chapter, we sometimes also find a much more concrete, quasi-sensory or sometimes fully visual phenomenology of luminosity that may involve actual visual experience. It is not at all easy to make sense of the relationship between the various kinds of luminosity. Survey response effects may be playing a role: For example, the occurrence of the word “luminosity” (or another visual term) in an item may have encouraged respondents to agree with it based on the fact that their MPE experiences had actual visual elements, even if the item explicitly referred to a nonsensory context. All I can do is draw attention to the fact that there may be three interrelated ways to interpret our phenomenological data, on three levels of description: the raw physical intensity of an internal stimulus source, functional autonomy, and intrinsic epistemicity. Let me briefly explain.

First, I would propose that the relevant phenomenology of quasi-perceptual concreteness consists in the fact that the subjective experience of tonic alertness varies

along a dimension of intensity, although it is clearly mode-neutral and therefore not associated with any interoceptive or exteroceptive sensory modality. As we saw in chapter 4, tonic alertness is what determines the capacity for sustained attention in the absence of an external cue; the conscious experience of wakefulness simply means *knowing* this capacity, having a model of it. My suggestion is that the phenomenology of wakefulness itself has an aspect of raw feeling or sheer intensity, just as the bodily sensation of hunger and the visual quality of redness do (e.g., in terms of saturation or purity in a color experience)—but that the actual stimulus source, its hidden cause, is internal to the brain and doesn't map onto any internal sensory system or an event beyond the organism's sensory sheets (e.g., the retina for vision or the skin for touch). It need not have anything to do with an equivalent of blood sugar levels or images on the retina, but it may be wholly determined by the process activating the cortex itself. This is entirely speculative and only time will tell, but the raw-feeling aspect of wakefulness could correspond to the physical signal of the ascending reticular formation or a specific aspect of activity in the diffuse thalamocortical relay. That is, it could be directly related to the mechanism by which the brain first wakes itself up and then begins to "broadcast" whatever comes in through the senses much more widely within itself. Maybe meditation has something to do with, just like in a color experience, increasing the "saturation" of pure wakefulness in our model of reality. Phenomenologically, it seems that as soon and as long as we are awake, something always radiates (there can even be a subtle quality of vibrancy), but it does so with varying degrees of intensity (or "nonvisual brightness") and it has an aspect of raw feeling. This is where the concreteness comes from. Yet none of this explains where the decidedly *visual* concreteness found in some cases could originate.

Second, not only does luminosity come in variable strengths and degrees, but it also is functionally autonomous and permeates all of phenomenal space. Now we move from a physical to a functional level of description. Here, luminosity or "self-luminosity" can be analyzed as a visual analogy for the experienced *functional autonomy* of tonic alertness (chapter 4). In German translations, this aspect has sometimes been termed *Eigenstrahlkraft* ("proper radiance" or "the power of autonomous radiance"). This quality may point not so much to a distinct form of phenomenal character or representational content, but rather to a functional dimension structuring the space of conscious experience, which in turn allows a relative ordering of global states. Global states could have more or less *Eigenstrahlkraft*, more or less intrinsic radiance or brightness. It is also conceivable that an organism may possess an inner representation of this dimension, knowing its own current degree of wakefulness, and that talking about self-luminosity is actually a way of talking about tonic alertness—a cue-independent,

intrinsic baseline of wakefulness that is always there whenever there is conscious experience at all, that is functionally autonomous, and that is largely independent of the ever-changing kaleidoscope of surface phenomenology. Meditation practice could—as Chinul, the founder of Korean Zen, would have it—consist in attending to this inner representation of wakefulness, *tracing back* the radiance of your own self-aware mind to its intrinsic baseline.

Third, if we read “luminosity” as a phenomenological metaphor for epistemic openness (chapters 4 and 5), then it bears a direct relation to the semantic constraint of epistemicity, the self-disclosing quality of knowing. It has an epistemological dimension. There is a quality of subjective confidence in luminosity because—whatever your current model of reality is—there is a detectable signature of knowing folded right into it. This may well be an abstract computational fact, one that will hold for all conscious systems. To quote Chinul again, this time on different forms of nescience, or not-knowing: “As far as the true mind is concerned, it knows while knowing nothing; but because it is impartial, quiet, and utterly radiant, it is different from the nescience of grass and trees.”¹²

In the context of a visual metaphor, for something to be “self-luminous” means that it possesses a quality of intrinsic epistemicity because it autonomously *makes itself knowable*. Think of a single burning candle in a dark and empty room. The candle not only illuminates the room, but also endows itself with the property of visibility. By burning, it creates the condition of possibility for visual experience. It is not something that needs to be discovered or gradually constructed by an epistemic effort, in an agentive, top-down manner. No self is needed. If we take the visual metaphor of “self-luminosity” at face value, then the candlelight of MPE must be continuously self-revealing and transcendental at the same time—an internal process that discloses itself by creating the possibility of being known.

“Self-luminosity” could therefore be treated as a visual analogy for the phenomenal signature of knowing, as an attempt to express *what it is like*. Let me give one last example, drawing on an analogy from vision science. From a scientific perspective, a consciously experienced visual quality like “redness” cannot be analyzed merely as hue plus saturation because it always also varies along a third subjective dimension of “brightness.” Pure awareness might be like a domain-general form of brightness that comes in varying degrees of intensity and applies to hearing and all other sensory modalities too. Zero brightness means zero phenomenal experience. In our analogy, the subjectively experienced brightness of a red object represents sheer stimulus strength for the organism—that is, it models the *luminance* of a visually given physical object—and perhaps MPE turns out to be a literal, mode-neutral form of brightness. Once again

taking a radically naturalist perspective, the internal “luminance” in question could be a dynamical property of some part of the neural body. Therefore, if we want to understand the phenomenal concreteness of mode-neutral and apparently contentless wakefulness, then we must ask: What, for bare wakefulness, is the nonsensory equivalent of the raw stimulus intensity that is caused by the physical property of luminance in a given visual target and that, in the domain of visual consciousness, leads to the experiential quality called brightness? Is there something like “mode-neutral brightness”? Can it become part of the self-model; can one experientially *embody* it? If so, what is the stimulus source, what its hidden cause, and how would prediction errors and their ongoing minimization be reflected as part of conscious experience? These questions also close the loop and bring us back to the physical. If we read “self-luminosity” as a visual analogy, then the question becomes: What exactly is “luminant” here—is it perhaps a part of the neural body?

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The Elephant and the Blind

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

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