

## 19 Witnessing

The world reflecting in a mirror without a perceiving observer. [#1735]

An impression of “there are impersonal eyes in the room.” [#3451]

“Witness consciousness” is a global phenomenology. This is to say that the *totality* of all experiential contents appears as if being observed by something that isn’t really an “observer” at all—by a timeless, impersonal, knowing presence. Witness consciousness is our first example of an experience that (as explained in the introduction) is neither content-specific nor simply a “state,” but a *mode* of consciousness—that is, a global *way* in which reality appears to us: The world is mirrored in an all-encompassing quality of infinite, choiceless, and nonconceptual knowing. The phenomenon has been known and discussed in Indian philosophy for many centuries, and certain Western schools of meditation in the Vedic tradition (TM) explicitly tell their students to expect the phenomenal quality of “witnessing” as their practice advances, during the daytime as well as during dreamless deep sleep (chapter 20).

3389 Since I already have many years of meditation practice behind me, infinity experiences, or the experience that an infinite observer is observing my earthly life, happen to me over and over in daytime consciousness. Waking sleep and conscious dreaming, however, are rather rare. [ . . . ]

Witness consciousness can occur spontaneously and effortlessly, outside of formal practice, and it can last for hours:

1501 I once had another experience that lasted half a day, during the activity. I did my normal work in the office, but at the same time I was a witness to what I was doing. The big advantage of this was that I did not get tired at all. It was as if I was untouchable from the outside. The mind was fully awake and clear.

It all went smoothly of its own accord, everything proceeded intuitively and was completely right. A really great experience.

The global, passive witness is not a person or an epistemic agent (i.e., an active “knowing self”); it is not something that has goals, makes choices, and selects objects of knowledge. It is entirely impersonal, but it also seems as if the phenomenal process of witnessing can be terminated at will:

800 It is for me like something, a presence, bigger than myself, that observes in a neutral or sometimes benevolent way and that knows.

3530 During experiences in the nondreaming state I often had the perception that an observer, who is not a physically contoured observer but kind of like “that which observes,” simply takes an interest in what is happening in the area that I usually call “in me” or “I,” in everything that surfaces in terms of thoughts, sensations, feelings, etc., but that I could then switch back to a more controlling active observer, who could specifically direct certain ideas and focuses that were considered helpful by this authority. [. . .]

There are cases (e.g., #1756 in chapter 24) in which pure witnessing of vacuous space is preceded by a gradual dissolution of body boundaries. The phenomenology of pure observation sometimes co-occurs with unbounded, spacious awareness:

3497 A feeling of being unlimited and of observing is there, surrounded by and part of unlimited space. [. . .]

Conceptually, witness consciousness still retains the duality of world and witness; it can even appear as a full-blown state of dissociation. But, as always, phenomenology in the real world may be much richer and much less clear cut than any conceptual schema. Witness consciousness, for example, often occurs in the context of, or alternates with, what we will investigate under the headings of “nondual awareness” and “nondual being” or unity (see chapters 26 and 27).

2999 I had the “feeling” I was the whole world and at the same time I was a silent witness of this “feeling.”

2916 [. . .] Relatively common is the experience of the pure, very old, actually eternal witness, in whose awareness all phenomena emerge as on a canvas. Bodily perceptions, thoughts, feelings, sensory perceptions are all manifestations or plays of light on the three-dimensional canvas. Differentiated from this is the experience of being IN THE MIDDLE of the phenomena and experiencing them directly and in immediate identity as an intensely “juicy” three-dimensional experience.

Occasionally, there are cases of strong pure-awareness experiences following emergencies (e.g., #2862 in chapter 32). In some of these cases, minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) is not merely a phenomenal state, but a *mode* of conscious experience. The same seems to apply to the subset of witness consciousness experiences: As a global phenomenology, it can also occur during emergencies and following accidents. It is an entirely different mode of experiencing reality, but its phenomenological profile also clearly differs from dissociative states or out-of-body experiences following accidents and severe trauma:

1831 After meditation I was sitting in the garden in a contemplative, relaxed state, everything was very light and softly drawn, a three-year-old child was playing next to me, but I was busy with nothing and thinking about nothing. Suddenly a young cow charged through the garden from next door—I just thought, oh, this could get dangerous for the child, but quite calmly, without this contemplative feeling having changed, I just had the feeling that there was now a need for action—that was my only thought—everything else happened by itself, I didn't decide anything, I didn't think anything, I wasn't afraid or excited (and I'm definitely afraid of boisterous cattle!). I acted as if in a dream state, there was also no sense of time or self, I just had the completely neutral intention to protect the child without any emotion and without thinking . . . I walked completely calmly toward the approaching cow—and it was so unbelievable—the cow just stopped galloping right in front of me and I could just touch her and hold her—and there was this encounter, this feeling of not being separated from this cow, she looked at me so incredulously and was completely trusting—we were both in a totally different space, a different time, a different connection, and my body was as if sleepwalking but completely self-sufficient, it was a completely fearless, very peaceful situation—absolutely in this outer world and not of this world at all—everything was as if damped down by something soft, tender, light, as if wrapped in cotton wool—yes, maybe space really had a different density. This action of “me” catching the cow was the talk of the village for a week—I was the big hero—but that was not “me.” The clearest feeling was rather that maybe it was acting and I was watching. Whether this is called a form of awareness—I don't know—but I experience this kind of “body awareness” quite often. My body acts so precisely, so perfectly and independently, intuitively—without me even having the opportunity to start a thought. . . . until my consciousness has understood what is happening—“I” could observe my body in its absolutely precise action

without feeling fear or any emotion for even a moment. It has happened this way in several really dangerous emergency situations—I have never even had a scratch, but without this what I call awareness of the body I might just as well have been dead. It was always free of thoughts, fear, time, and perception was softly cushioned and everything took place in a space with a different density and light.

### *Sākṣin* and the Ideal Observer

When the mind is quiet, we come to know ourselves as the pure witness. We withdraw from the experiencer and its experience and stand apart in pure awareness, which is between and beyond the two. The personality, based on self-identification, on imagining oneself to be something: “I am this, I am that,” continues, but only as a part of the objective world.

Its identification with the witness snaps.

—Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj (ca. 1897–1981), *I Am That*

But there’s a danger lurking here. That Douglas should think he’s the One! [. . .] I am through to Who I am as Who I am, not as Douglas. That’s very important. It’s very reassuring, too. I am sure I’m through to Who I am. Why? Partly because old Douglas is not involved in the process. If he were, I should doubt the whole thing [. . .] What I am apt to forget is that when I see Who I am, it’s not Douglas who’s doing it; it’s the One who is doing it.

—Douglas Harding (1909–2007), *On Having No Head*

“Witness Consciousness” emerged as factor 12 in our study, referring to the experience of a passive and impersonal observer being present. This statistical finding demonstrates how a classical term from the Advaita Vedanta system of philosophy (the *sākṣin*) finds direct expression within phenomenological reports given by present-day practitioners from many countries. The notion of the “witness” has a long tradition in Indian and Tibetan metaphysics, and on a phenomenological reading, it bears quite obvious relevance to the concept of MPE. For example, the idea of nonpersonal witnessing captures the phenomenal signature of knowing, the centerless and nonegoic character of awareness itself, the two qualities of timelessness and simplicity, and also the element of “choiceless awareness,” the intrinsic nonreactivity that is the goal of all mindfulness practice. Using our new conceptual instruments, we can now describe it as an uncontracted phenomenal signature of knowing.

The earliest appearance of the idea seems to be found in the Atharva Veda, in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad,<sup>1</sup> whereas the source of the philosophical concept *sākṣin* is obscure.<sup>2</sup> Witness consciousness is that which makes all knowledge possible, that which cannot

itself become an object of knowledge, and that which is self-luminous. Bina Gupta lists the following epistemological characteristics:

1. The witness consciousness, although the basis of all knowing, is different from the object known. It is implied in every act of knowing. It is the ultimate subject; it can never become an object of knowledge.
2. It is the pure element of awareness in all knowing. It is one, immutable, indivisible reality.
3. It shines by its own light; it is self-luminous.
4. It is different from the empirical individual (*jīva*; Sanskrit: जीव), who cognizes and enjoys. In other words, it is different from the empirical individual who is caught up in the triple states of waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, there are also many metaphysical—not only epistemological or phenomenological—readings of witness consciousness.<sup>4</sup> For example, the witness could be an aspect of reality itself; it could be the self-knowing world as a whole, or even God. I call this the “principle of phenomenal correlates”: For practically every metaphysical theory that philosophers have developed (like idealism, panpsychism, pantheism, solipsism, or nihilism), there is an altered state or even a mode of consciousness that directly corresponds to this theory. There is a correlated, brain-bound conscious model of reality, a nonconceptual mode of experiencing the world, a region in phenomenal state space that later is expressed by this theory—there is a *phenomenology* of idealism, a *phenomenology* of panpsychism, and so on. In different cultural contexts, or against the backdrop of a specific religion, this altered state will be described differently. For every set of ontological assumptions (e.g., mind itself is the ultimate foundation of reality, conscious experience is fundamental and ubiquitous, God is identical with the cosmos, etc.) there is a global mode of phenomenal experience that is mirrored by this specific metaphysical theory—and that perhaps originally even inspired it.

Let us take the example of panpsychism.<sup>5</sup> I would claim that what people *really* find so fascinating about the topic of panpsychism is not the philosophical debate as such, but rather an emotionally attractive, intuitive feeling that they get when they try to imagine their own world with the added extra of panpsychism being true. The fascination is generated by a phenomenological inkling, a glimpse of the profundity and deep relevance of a global mode of experience that really exists (chapter 27). Philosophical panpsychism is the poor man’s nondual awareness.

For the special case of witness consciousness, it is interesting to note that if one looks into early Western theories of consciousness, such as those centering on the Latin concept of *conscientia*, a common motif is that an agent is conscious by virtue of sharing its

knowledge with an ideal observer. I think that the witness of Indian philosophy is such an ideal observer. In an early European context, this observer could be God, a divine person who sees everything you do, think, and feel. I think that on a phenomenological level, witness consciousness bears great structural resemblance to Christian ideas like “placing yourself in the Lord’s presence” or “resting in the Lord’s gaze,” as found in certain kinds of contemplative prayer. In Christian philosophy, awareness of an ideal observer being present is directly related to having a moral conscience and *bearing witness* to your own sins. To have a conscience means to install a model of an ideal observer in your mind; the “purity” of consciousness is really a moral kind of purity, and consciousness in this more fundamental sense is the only space in which we can be together with God before the body dies.<sup>6</sup>

In religiously inspired accounts of consciousness, the metaphysical assumption is that the ideal observer is a divine person, that the observer must be another *self* or epistemic agent of some sort (see chapter 25). From a philosophical point of view, this assumption is superfluous. A mistake frequently made by Christian theologians has been to think that just because they take themselves to be persons, God must be a person too. But the notion of ideal observation does not need to be reified into the concept of a personal God. My main point is that both concepts—the witness and the personal God—are metaphysical reifications of what originally was a phenomenological *process*—namely, the process of “ideal observation,” of “observing without an observer.” This leads to the interesting possibility that human beings have experienced the ideal observation of selfless witness consciousness for millennia, and that some cultural contexts led to the creation of an egoic interpretation (like early European Christianity, in which a personal God sees everything, all the time), whereas others developed a more abstract metaphysical theory of consciousness, including nonegoic models of witnessing (like Advaita Vedanta in India, the famous nondualistic school of philosophy propounded by Gaudapada and Adi Shankara in the seventh and eighth centuries).

On a purely phenomenological reading that abstracts away from all metaphysical and epistemological aspects of the term “witness consciousness,” we find something that strongly resembles MPE. It is a self-luminous form of bare awareness onto which intentional objects can be superimposed during single “acts of knowing,” a nonegoic type of phenomenal character that has nothing to do with any form of conscious self-representation as a cognitive agent or an entity possessing subjective preferences and personality traits. Perhaps most important, it is something that in principle could exist in waking states, during dreaming, and in dreamless sleep, simply because it is different from any phenomenal self-model that portrays only the “empirical individual” by contracting pure awareness into an inner image of a person who seemingly “cognizes and

enjoys.” Witness consciousness strongly resembles prototypical MPE as an intrinsically nonreactive, nonegoic, and nonconceptual experience of knowing and wakefulness. In a way, it is as if the background property of epistemic openness becomes apparent and more pronounced. Witness consciousness can be interpreted as a manifest, non-contracted, and all-encompassing variant of the “phenomenal signature of knowing” (introduced in chapter 7) coming to the fore: a situation in which what was termed the “model of our epistemic space” in chapter 5 has become more and more explicit, losing its phenomenal transparency (chapter 28). Phenomenologically, there is now not only the abstract possibility of knowing, but an *actual* process of observing without an observer. In the existing literature, one interesting reading of the *sākṣin* parses it as a “field” of consciousness, within which the distinctions among subject, object, and the process of knowing become a “context for contents, or ‘space’ in which forms may appear.”<sup>7</sup>

One target for future studies will be the relationship between witness consciousness and the phenomenal character of “connectedness” (chapter 11). Is witness consciousness a dissociative state? Does it lack compassion? Could it even be related to psychiatric disorders like derealization and depersonalization, in which the world and the self can appear unreal and without emotional coloring, as if seen through a fog or a milk-glass pane? This would seem to exclude the phenomenal qualities of clarity (chapter 5) and connectedness (chapter 11) that many of our respondents have reported. True, becoming aware of the phenomenal character of awareness itself has often been described as not only looking through a window, but gradually beginning to see the window pane itself, as if shifting focus to look *at* the window (more on this in chapter 28, “Transparency, Translucency, and Virtuality”). But if we take the phenomenology of pure awareness seriously, MPE doesn’t have the hazy opacity of a milk-glass pane; rather, it enhances the vividness of what is seen through it. It is a *lucid* form of empty cognizance, and yet we can become aware of it—for example, by “resting in its gaze.” Witness consciousness seems much more strongly connected to the aspects of nonidentification, transparency, and virtuality investigated in other chapters of this book. What remains puzzling is the quality of “disconnectedness” that accompanies it. Consider this description from the literature:

When I first started meditating, I was having fairly flashy and dramatic feelings during and after meditation. There was a huge contrast between in and out of meditation, and this has gotten less over the years. More qualities that happen in meditation are now there in activity—not only in my state of consciousness, but also physiologically. My metabolism is more subtle and relaxed and stable. The main

thing I notice these days is just more of a witness value, like I'm being pulled back from everything. I'm not so strongly connected. I don't identify with my body, my thoughts, and my circumstances. I realize that's not me; that's not all I am, just my body and thinking. It's like witnessing, but it's not schizophrenia. I'm not attached to little ups and downs. I'm much more stable emotionally.<sup>8</sup>

Phenomenologically, it is not clear how MPE as expressed in witness consciousness relates to MPE as expressed in the phenomenal character of "connectedness" (chapter 11).

A second interesting target for future research is the degree of theory contamination involved in reports of witness consciousness. In some meditation movements like TM, practitioners are explicitly primed to expect witness consciousness and to regard it as a major marker of significant progress, while in many others, the concept is almost never mentioned at all. However, in our own study, only 57 of 359 (16 percent) of participants scoring high ( $\geq 70$ ) on factor 12 ("Witness Consciousness") told us that TM was their personal meditation technique, which is not significantly more than for the low scorers (135 of 1,000 participants, or 13.5 percent). In meditators, therefore, witnessing may be a robust but rather rare phenomenon that mostly occurs independently of personal belief systems or theoretical background. However, the phenomenology of witnessing has been interestingly linked to psychiatric conditions known as "depersonalization" and "derealization disorder." Depersonalization involves a phenomenology of being detached from what one previously took to be one's self. Patients may also report an attenuation or loss of the phenomenal quality of agency, feeling as if they were an outside observer of their own thoughts and actions as well as their body. Derealization involves detachment from reality as a whole, with patients seeing the world around them as if through a milk-glass pane or fog, or experiencing it as dreamlike and surreal (see chapter 28 for some interesting parallels).

What I have termed "theory contamination" may causally determine whether the state is experienced as distressful, causing panic, or as wholesome and positive: "a syndrome may be produced that, depending on the attitude the person adopts toward himself and then toward the resulting phenomenon, may be experienced either as something to be sought and valued or as something to be feared and called a disease."<sup>9</sup> As Bryce Huebner and Genevieve Hayman have pointed out, ultimately what matters in minimizing psychiatric risks is the moral-phenomenological framework of meditative practice. They argue that since selfless states can be cultivated using meditative practices, it should be possible to evoke *positive* transformations similar to those that emerge in the context of drug-induced ego dissolution, but in forms as persistent and



pervasive as the kinds of ego dissolution that occur in depersonalization and derealization disorder.<sup>10</sup> That is, meditation could give us states that have not only the desired experiential positivity, but also the functional persistence that we find in psychiatrically precarious contexts. Could witness consciousness therefore be a special, lower-risk variant of self-induced depersonalization syndrome, as Raymond Kennedy proposed in 1976? If I am right in suggesting that individual background assumptions and “socio-cultural priors” may play a major role not only in how advanced meditative experiences are verbally reported, but also in how they are embodied or how the individual and its brain actually *react* to them, then witness consciousness might provide us with an interesting example. The cluster of MPE modes traditionally described as “witness consciousness” may be a particularly positive behavioral and experiential outcome of a process that gets other people into psychiatry because they don’t have the right form of narrative self-deception (chapter 17), the relevant “background myth,” or the stable social context of a shared moral-phenomenological framework. In a 1990 paper titled “Depersonalization and Meditation,” based on experiential reports by TM practitioners, Richard Castillo wrote this:

Thus, the ideation surrounding the experience of depersonalization is modified from that associated with psychopathology to that of religious experience. [. . .] Once the patient has accepted the definition of the problem in terms taken from the religious model, the patient’s emotions will become attached to symbols associated with this mythic world. [. . .] Witnessing is described as the experience of being a witness to one’s self—that is, being split into an observing self and a participating self. TM meditators interpret these experiences as “higher states of consciousness” or “enlightenment.” In the mythic world of the meditators, Witnessing is considered to be highly desirable.<sup>11</sup>

I suggest that the relative lack of reported anxiety in response to the depersonalization is a result of the ideational construction of the experiences in terms consistent with the mythic model of TM. In other words, instead of “pathologizing” the experiences—that is, interpreting them as psychopathology according to a medical model of reality—they are “sacralizing” the experiences—that is, interpreting them according to a sacred model of reality.<sup>12</sup>

I would like to call this the “principle of self-healing” through the cultivation of a stable and positively experienced altered state of consciousness: There might be rare cases in which people have overcome a psychosis or other psychiatric illness on their own by successfully “spiritualizing” or “sacralizing” their conscious model of reality, using a method such as systematic meditation practice. Another concept that may

prove to be relevant in this context is the reenchantment of our life-world (chapter 17). It is certainly conceivable that some patients have managed to free themselves from the suffering and psychological strain, regaining a normal level of coping with everyday life. However, it has to be emphasized that phenomenological profiles of depersonalization, derealization, and witness consciousness may vary widely—just think of the aspects of “clarity,” “unboundedness,” and “unity” (recall #1501, #3497, and #2999), or the occurrence of witnessing during dreamless deep sleep (see the example presented next and in chapter 20). And none of this touches the epistemological question of whether these MPE modes contain any valid insight into the nature of reality. The phenomenal experience of agency may or may not be an illusion, conscious experience may or may not be a wholly impersonal process, and so on. But it is certainly possible that one or more of these three are high-convergence modes that allow us phenomenological access to certain realities about how our minds work, and that their underlying ontology is perhaps closer to the scientific worldview than that of ordinary waking consciousness. More generally, putting witness consciousness in context opens up an interesting new perspective. From now on, we can always ask: Was there a specific background myth, a metaphysical model against which a specific experience occurred? Is there a mental model of reality that is getting confirmed by the experience?

A third open question for the future concerns the fact that for many centuries, descriptions of witness consciousness have always included the possibility that it is a phenomenon that can occur during deep sleep and dreaming too.<sup>13</sup> I have thought for a long time that testing this claim using the tools of modern science will be an exciting (if technically difficult) project for empirical research, and certainly highly relevant from a philosophical perspective. In chapters 20 and 21, therefore, we will take a deeper look at the possibility of MPE occurring during dreamless deep sleep and while dreaming. As a transition to what is to come, and to give you a first intuitive sense of what I am talking about, here is another phenomenological case study from the literature, given by a TM meditator:

There were long periods of witnessing throughout the day and witnessing sleep a lot too. That was the most concrete. You can often wonder when you're having an experience in activity if it's real or if you are only imagining it. In sleep it's hard to imagine something. Witnessing was happening in both deep sleep and dreaming. Most of my life experience of sleep was you'd lay your head on the pillow and a few seconds later, you'd wake up. But I started to become aware of the passage of time. Sleep wasn't just lost to me, but I was experiencing it all night long. This experience has been continual since then. It makes sleep a lot more enjoyable, because there's a bliss in actually experiencing it rather than having no experience of it.<sup>14</sup>

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# The Elephant and the Blind

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

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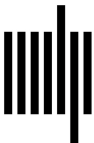
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