

## 25 Ego Dissolution: Melting into the Phenomenal Field

It was as if my body / my being was pixelated and dissolved into the rest of the pixels that make up the entirety of everything else. [#3086]

There are countless ways in which the experience of pure awareness can shift from background to foreground. The phenomenology of translucency is one way: “It’s like reality shining through when all ideas, concepts . . . step aside for a moment” (#2528; see chapter 28). Another common phenomenological transition leads into a new model of reality in which the conscious experience of perceiving and knowing is no longer structured by a localized and “knowing” self, depicted by the brain as intentionally directed at distinct, external objects of knowledge. In such cases, the experience of egoic knowing turns into the experience of nondual knowing. As the original egoic self-model expands and sometimes even dissolves, some of the phenomenological effects described in chapter 24 may occur—like a dissolution of body boundaries, a sense of weightlessness, bodiless body-experience, groundless groundedness, timelessness, or the disappearance of the original spatial frame of reference. In the second half of that chapter, I offered the new conceptual instrument of a “phenomenal unit of identification,” which simply means any content of conscious experience to which we may refer by saying “I *am* this!” or “I *was* this!” Using this new tool, we can now point out that in some cases, the nondual quality of knowing can apparently become the new unit of identification because it can be “bodilessly embodied.” In other cases, it will be more accurate to describe nondual knowing as a state lacking any identification whatsoever.

Nondual knowing sometimes may then lead to states later described as full ego dissolution, pure being, wholeness, or simply a feeling of oneness with the nonconceptual essence of conscious experience per se. At the risk of repeating myself, one of the many surprising results of our study was how frequently meditators, when asked to describe their own phenomenal experiences during episodes of pure awareness, actually report

an attenuation or a complete dissolution of their body boundaries, or a soft superimposition of the conscious whole onto those boundaries. It seems that sometimes this can be the threshold to spontaneously occurring ego dissolution. Let us take this tentative phenomenological observation as our starting point:

3166 I know of states [. . .] that I would describe as very stable. There are hardly any thoughts, just very subtle. The space around me is white and bright. I hardly perceive the body anymore. But it is a state that feels like “before something,” perhaps like before a complete dissolution. I practice trusting that this will happen on its own at some point. I know I can’t do it. [. . .]

Body dissolution often leads to a phenomenology of spatial expansion and becoming one with the phenomenal field or its substrate as a whole:

1337 [. . .] I began to disincorporate and spread in every direction. My mass had converted into energy. The energy was aware. My awareness spread in boundless directions. I was everywhere and everything.

1979 I experienced my body sense as having no boundaries and extending into infinity, although tapering out, and its “shape” was forever changing. This was life-changing.

2481 While meditating I experienced the dissolution of my self and body boundaries and no longer knew where or who I am or who is breathing. There was only the breath without inside or outside, without subject or object.

44 [. . .] It was my first experience of “awareness” in meditation. [. . .] I had been just watching the corridor without any thought. And suddenly I noticed that I feel there is no glass door separating me and the corridor, and even my body. There was only the shine of reflected wood in the corridor, feeling (I) no longer have a border to the world and neither does the world.

1229 [. . .] I reach a state where my consciousness is a vast dark void where there’s no difference between the void, emptiness, and me. I’m part of the void, I can “see” it but I’m not body or soul, I’m part of the dark/void and there’s no difference between me and the world. I lose the feeling of being a body, but I experience a feeling that all that is this void, or emptiness. Even though it’s darkness it’s a warm safe experience where no questions need to be raised about anything . . . it’s an all-knowing, uncentered space that without doubt is behind every phenomenon that is ever experienced. I regard this experience as a feeling of unity, and I feel truly connected to our universe during these states.

Sometimes body sensations can merge into a nondual phenomenal field, creating a global state of “embodying the world,” as if the unit of identification had been maximized:

1675 [ . . . ] I remembered the monk's instructions to try and see if you could experience the sounds coming from outside as coming from within. At this time frogs were croaking outside the meditation hall. I did as the monk instructed and almost immediately there was a "unity" experience of all conscious experience taking place in one field. Meaning that the tactile sensations of my body and the sounds of the frog were all being generated in the same field of consciousness, without any inner (the tactile sensations) or outer (the frog rib-bits). Everything seemed very slow, and calm as well. This state continued after I got up from sitting and walked back to my dormitory. [ . . . ]

3334 [ . . . ] it dawned on me that I was the floor, the grass, the trees, the people who were there, and in fact the whole world. I felt the wind through my branches (I was the trees) and felt all kind of worms and insects crawl through me, because I felt I was the earth. [ . . . ] It was a very full, dense experience, very complete, colors were extra bright, food was extra tasty, touching things was extra intense. It wasn't very relaxing because I knew it would go away and I tried to make it last longer to investigate it. It also felt nice to be this whole. This experience lasted a couple of hours. The experience has changed my life.

In open, nonabsorbed states, body dissolution can lead to ego dissolution. Episodes of this type are often described as a peculiar kind of highest-order gestalt switch. One longstanding idea is that the frequently unnoticed phenomenal character of awareness itself forms the background for all other forms of conscious experience. It is not entirely clear what it would mean to validate (or falsify) this idea via modern-day computational phenomenology, but if it were true, then a certain subset of pure-awareness experiences could perhaps be described as a global background/foreground switch. Others may be better described as a form of indeterminacy or "neither-nor-ness," a dissolution of the distinction between background and foreground or inside and outside:

1690 Positive experience: I was sitting on a chair focusing on my breath, following a guided metta meditation. There was a subtle immediacy of experience that simply just manifested. As it manifested, it felt like the "background" of my sensorium became the "foreground," or perhaps the foreground itself just disappeared. It was all very subtle. As soon as I tried to capture it, I was back in a dual subject-object awareness. The experience itself was relieving, like taking off a tight shoe and letting your foot breathe. Negative: I wasn't meditating, and I was sleep deprived. After putting down a book that was discussing non-dual consciousness, I felt a sort of immediacy of experience. The foreground disappeared, and the background was endless. It felt as if it had always been there, and I was just now remembering. But instead of "feeling home" or relief,

I felt an immense dread weighing me down like a thick blanket. As I came back to subject–object awareness, I felt like there was no point in navigating space in this manner.

2456 Pure awareness: the moments during meditation when perception “tilts” like a plane, the bottom of the plane of consciousness turns upward, I simply “am” one floor “higher.” No sensory sensations, pure inner seeing. Weightless, silent, unspeakably bright and peaceful, all boundaries are abolished, my body boundaries have merged with the environment, with the universe, I am the sky, the sky is everything, the self no longer exists, it has dissolved. [. . .]

2559 [. . .] all of a sudden, I entered this state. It must have been between 30–60 mins, as the break passed by and I wasn’t noticing. I had no body sensations, no pain, no time nor space, no thoughts, totally silent and whole. I felt as if something had turned “inside out,” as if nothing in my perceptual fields was as usual. I had only one very slow thought passing by, as if it was passing inside the dark field, and it translates into something like—“This is it.” There was total equanimity, and it was perfect, there was no need to “come back.” When I finally did, I was totally shook. It was nothing like I’d experienced before. This happened fifteen years ago. Looking back—this experience changed my life path, my career choice. But most of all, it invoked a strange sense of fearlessness, of intimacy with life and beyond.

3369 [. . .] There was a sensation of “being turned inside out,” as if I had slipped through the eye of a needle, and everything dissolved. Every bodily sensation, thought, emotion, everything. There was a very light-filled and incredibly joyful pure presence, pure being in which there was no object or subject, observer, etc., but only pure, luminous joy and limitless being. The sense of time was completely gone; when “it was over” it was 2.5 hours later. [. . .] The awareness was very strong that this is “actually” the true being and my real nature, also that it is infinite, eternal, and indestructible. [. . .]

### The Epistemic Agent Model

What about thinking? Here I do find something: it is thought; this alone cannot be stripped from me. I am, I exist, this is certain. But for how long? Certainly only for as long as I am thinking; for perhaps if I were to cease from all thinking it might also come to pass that I might immediately cease altogether to exist. I am therefore a true thing, and one that truly exists; but what kind of thing? I have said it already: one that thinks.

—René Descartes (1596–1650), *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Second Meditation

What exactly does it mean to merge with the phenomenal field as a whole? Does it mean that the unit of identification is maximized or that it disappears? Here is a new conceptual instrument that may help us describe some of these experiences more clearly, in particular the phenomenology of ego dissolution in the context of minimal phenomenal experience (MPE). I call it the “epistemic agent model.”

Let us consider a few examples of times when we have an epistemic agent model: the conscious experiences of (1) being a thinking self, (2) being a self in the very act of attending, and (3) being a meditator attempting to “have an insight” (e.g., to recognize her true nature). Let’s begin with the first example. Whenever you try to mentally calculate, to think logically, or to actively form a new concept, you experience yourself as an epistemic agent, as a thinking self that wants to understand something, as an entity that wants to create new knowledge. You have a goal, and you act to reach this goal. Mental calculation is effortful, as is forming a new concept or attempting to create a novel philosophical argument. While you do it, you feel like you must control your own mind, and—if you’re successful—an inner experience of ownership and agency arises. The experience results from a special form of deliberate, goal-directed mental action,<sup>1</sup> which in turn leads to the transient combination of experiential qualities: a feeling of mental effort, plus a sense of ownership and agency. Perhaps falsely, this combination of experiential qualities can be described as a specific, nonbodily sense of self. This “cognitive sense of self” may be the intuitive anchor behind one of René Descartes’s central philosophical ideas, as published in 1641 in the second of his famous *Meditations on First Philosophy*: “‘I am, I exist’, whenever it is uttered by me, or conceived by the mind, necessarily is true.”

What about the second example of a context in which we have an epistemic agent model? If you are not thinking at all, but instead carefully attending to the sensations in your feet as you slowly walk, to the sound of a bell vanishing into silence, or to the self-generated sound-shape of a mantra in your mind doing the same, then you have an epistemic agent model. There is something that you want to perceive and experience as precisely as possible. Again, you try to gently control the dynamics of an inner process, but this time by optimizing for precision. There is also a quality of motivation, maybe even earnestness. In the carefulness of your attending, there is a sense of effort, which may be more or less subtle. A goal state has been selected, and the conscious self in the act of attending actively pursues this goal state—this is our second example of what it means for the self to be an epistemic agent. The self is active, and it wants to know something. It wants to *realize* the goal state in its own mind.

And here is the third example. If you are a meditator and have read about fancy theories involving recognition of the “true self” (chapter 29) or the effortlessness of

spacious awareness (chapter 32), if you're expecting to learn to see your own true nature and "let go" in some profound way, if you intellectually know the difference between dual mindfulness and nondual mindfulness, then you are in serious trouble. You have become infected with a new kind of goal state, something that can apparently be known and *realized*. Now it is almost impossible to prevent the birth of a new and particularly clever epistemic agent model in your mind. This time, it purports to want to know pure, nondual awareness—it is trying to touch the elephant as directly as possible while still cleverly sustaining the blind toucher's own existence.

Do you know what a mahout is? A mahout is an elephant rider. In South and Southeast Asia, a mahout (who is usually male) often starts as a boy. He learns how to train and keep elephants, and he receives an elephant early in its life. We can imagine the meditating self as a rider sitting on the elephant of pure awareness—but in reality, this rider is a parasitic epistemic agent model on the elephant's back. The mahout is the controlling, knowing self. It is an image, creating dual experience and constraining the elephant's space of possibilities. Please note, however, that with a deeply conditioned, thoroughly trained, "well-behaved" elephant, the rider might not be sitting on its back at all. The rider could be a *virtual* mahout, a fictitious entity that arises only from time to time. The empirical evidence about mirror self-recognition in elephants is inconclusive at best,<sup>2</sup> but if the elephant saw and unexpectedly recognized itself in a mirror, then it might be surprised to discover that there was nobody sitting on its back.

The three examples that I have just given illustrate what it means to say that we have an internal model not only of some passively knowing self, but of an epistemic *agent*. There are goal states plus a possibility of failure; there is a corresponding high-level capacity like thinking or attending; and often this capacity is not just an abstract feature, but rather something that is actually exercised now—a concrete, ongoing process that is consciously experienced. An epistemic agent model is a special layer in the human self-model. It is what creates subjectivity in the sense of a strong first-person perspective. According to phenomenal experience, we are (thanks to the epistemic agent model) entities that often actively construct and search for new knowledge relations to the world and ourselves. We are information-hungry; there is something that we want to *know*. Phenomenologically, for a conscious cognitive system to operate under an epistemic agent model also means that the potentially all-pervading quality of knowing is contracted into a transparent phenomenal self-model—a fictitious entity that apparently knows that it knows.

Using two of our new conceptual instruments, provided in chapters 5 and 8, we could say that an epistemic space has temporarily contracted into the model of a knowing self, an autonomous inner agent. A new virtual self appears, and it seems to be self-aware. Apparently, it really knows that it knows—but the virtuality itself, the "as if"

quality, is not experienced (chapter 8). Since all of this happens on the level of conscious processing, the virtual self also creates the phenomenology of ownership for certain states of perceptual or cognitive knowledge. For a typical human being, this means that, subjectively, it now possesses a specific kind of self-knowledge—namely, knowing that I myself know and that I myself am apparently able to actively control certain epistemic states. This step finally introduces subject/object structure into the space of awareness, and thus I acquire a first-person perspective. Awareness is now dual awareness.

It is, however, perfectly possible to be conscious but have no epistemic agent model. The elephant doesn't drop dead without a mahout—but it may begin to wander around in a way that from the outside looks like aimless foraging. To shed some light on the epistemic agent model through contrast with situations in which it goes missing, let us look at some interesting new research on phenomena in the human mind that involve apparently aimless “epistemic foraging”<sup>3</sup> in an inner landscape. For example, the epistemic agent model collapses whenever an episode of mind-wandering begins. When our mind strays, we lose control over the thought process. Mind-wandering, “zoning out,” and daydreaming are forms of involuntary mental behavior. The epistemic agent has disappeared; we are decoupled from the present moment, lost in automatic inner behavior. Our daydream may be a story about how we have been a stable epistemic agent in the past or how we will successfully control thought and attention in the future. But in the present moment, relative to our current environment, we have no stable first-person perspective.

Interestingly, the same is true for the dream state: The epistemic agent model continuously breaks down, as we move through the dream narrative from one attentional lapse to the next. Research from sleep labs all over the world shows that dreams are states dominated by constant confusion, memory loss, and recurring disorientation. Only when we enter a lucid dream does an epistemic agent model stabilize itself, leading to a dream self that “knows” it is dreaming.<sup>4</sup> The moment in which the meditator realizes that she has been carried away by a train of thought and returns to her practice may often be a very similar kind of event. However, when becoming lucid in a dream, the brain generates a new self-model that continues in roughly the same phenomenal environment (only *roughly* because this environment is now experienced as much more vivid and stable, and is explicitly labeled “unreal”), whereas coming back from an episode of mind-wandering into the present moment also changes the phenomenally experienced environment (in which the physical surroundings may now dominate again instead of, say, a constantly recurring worry about one's mother). Of course, the epistemic agent model can also be highly unstable or absent following brain injury, during psychiatric illnesses, when fully immersed in medial environments, and while under the influence of psychoactive substances.<sup>5</sup>

The epistemic agent model also is an instrument in mind reading and social cognition. You can understand the observable behavior of others much better if you depict them as “knowing selves.” As an infant, you gradually learned to understand, and later even influence, your mother’s behavior by creating your very first mental model of an epistemic agent. In your own conscious mind, what was previously a hard-to-predict moving object in your environment now gradually transformed into the experience of a knowing self: Mama! Later, the biological organism that is you “discovered” that you are such a knowing self too—and this helped you understand and control bodily actions and the focus of attention. They became your *own* actions and your *own* attention. Long after the biological body was born, the epistemic agent model came online, and you began to enter social life. One reason why many serious practitioners, such as nuns and monks, choose to live in solitude or silence may simply be that social interactions automatically trigger the epistemic agent model: As soon as the gaze of the other has triggered the knowing self, this self is almost automatically embedded into a mesh of mutual updating, an often narrative network of knowing selves continuously validating each other’s existence. Not only does this shed new light on the pitfalls of teacher/disciple relationships, it also raises a few interesting questions. Could there be conscious social interactions without an epistemic agent model? In what contexts do animals like us really *need* the kind of active inner self-control and mental autonomy that a knowing self gives us—and when exactly would the absence of such a self be a good thing?

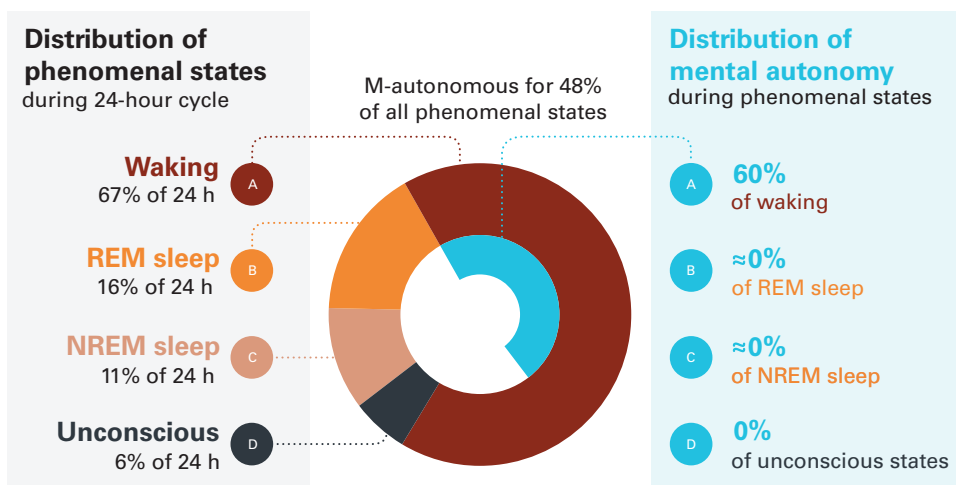
In my work on mind-wandering, I have argued that for roughly two-thirds of their conscious lives, human beings are not mentally autonomous subjects, and what we traditionally call “conscious thought” is a largely subpersonal process.<sup>6</sup> Most of the time, it really is the *brain* that thinks, not you, the person. Mental autonomy means that you, the person as a whole, are able to control your own inner behaviors, your thoughts, and your attention. It is a property that comes in degrees: Like any other information-processing system, you can have a higher or lower degree of self-control or mental autonomy. Meditation practice increases mental autonomy. This includes the capacity to impose rules on one’s own mental behavior, to explicitly select goals for mental action, to rationally guide mental activity, and, most important, to intentionally inhibit, suspend, or terminate an ongoing mental process. Scientists sometimes call this “veto control,”<sup>7</sup> and mind-wandering implies an *unnoticed* loss of veto control.

To have an epistemic agent model means to have an inner image of the property of mental autonomy attached to a virtual self. All of this also means that we will have to depart from the “myth of cognitive agency,” which says that the paradigmatic case of conscious cognition is one of autonomous, self-controlled rational thought.<sup>8</sup> It isn’t. Conscious thoughts are mostly automatic, subpersonal processes that are hard to control, and



only rarely do they become part of a stable inner model of an active, knowing self. Hard-thinking, professionally thoughtful academic philosophers in the West have perpetuated the myth of cognitive agency for centuries, but the philosophical practice of meditation cultivated in the East debunked it long ago. And now the new Western science of “spontaneous, task-unrelated thought” has confirmed that debunking through experimentation.<sup>9</sup>

Figure 25.1 has been adapted from an open-access paper of mine entitled “M-autonomy,” and it sums up a lot of empirical research on mind-wandering, day-dreaming, and what is sometimes called “spontaneous task-unrelated thought.”<sup>10</sup> The striking result is that having a stable “knowing self” is actually a rare experience, even during ordinary everyday life—it comes and goes very quickly. This is what meditators begin to realize when their practices begin to lift the veil of narrative self-deception (chapter 17): the instability, the impermanence, the volatility of the knowing self.



**Figure 25.1**

Distribution of conscious experience and mental autonomy over the twenty-four-hour cycle, based on empirical data plus a conservative estimate of the distribution of mental autonomy and the actual existence of an epistemic agent model across the conscious lifetime of a human being. Plausibly, we lack the experience of active mental self-control and a stable “knowing self” for about two-thirds of our lifetime, including periods of unconsciousness. In contrast to the traditional notion of “conscious thought,” thinking turns out to be in most cases a nonautonomous, sub-personal process that occurs without consciously experienced mental agency. Figure taken from Metzinger (2015) and adapted by Cyril Costines. See Abelson (2022) for an interesting application. “REM sleep” refers to “rapid eye movement sleep”; “NREM sleep” refers to “non-rapid eye movement sleep.”

Interestingly, the epistemic agent model is precisely what is completely missing in all full-absorption episodes of pure awareness and in the so-called nondual states that we will investigate in chapters 26 and 27.

For now, we can begin to combine this new conceptual instrument with the concept of the unit of identification introduced in chapter 24. During ordinary wake states, the epistemic agent model is what most of us identify with most strongly because it automatically functions as the unit of identification. Perhaps unfortunately, reading this book may feed and stabilize your epistemic agent model, and it may deepen your identification with the cognitive self. Yes, there is bodily self-awareness, and you may strongly identify with its affective tone and the emotional self-model emerging from it, but there is probably a clear phenomenological sense in which the thinking self and the active, selectively attending self are the true origins from which your mental perspective projects out into the world. They are what really turn you into a knowing *ego*, a self-conscious epistemic subject. Accordingly, the phenomenology of ego dissolution must consist in either a temporary disappearance of the epistemic agent model or a cessation of its function as the unit of identification.

As we saw in the last two chapters, the experience of pure awareness can coemerge with or even trigger the phenomenology of body dissolution. Sometimes this leads to states later described as “ego dissolution.” In many cases, what dissolves is precisely the inner image of the knowing self, the earnest meditator, or the epistemic agent model in your brain. In almost all cases and for almost all human beings, this epistemic agent model functions as the unit of identification: Whenever we have one, we automatically experience ourselves as *being* this thinking self (just as Descartes did), as being the invisible entity that controls the focus of attention, as being the entity that is curious and longs for pleasant surprises, and as being an *informavore* who always wants to know more.

The phenomenal character of MPE, by contrast, lacks the craving for novelty and the two elements of dynamic knowingness and egoic identification. MPEs frequently seem to break their inner connection, weakening the process of identification with the fictitious knowing self. If there is knowledge, it is no longer egoic knowledge.

In the next two chapters, therefore, we will look at the phenomenology of so-called nondual states. Traditionally, this concept refers to states of consciousness in which the distinction between subject and object has been suspended. Phenomenologically, it is pretty clear what objects are (the tree over there, the apple in the palm of your hand), but now we have a simple and precise way of saying what a “subject” is. Phenomenologically, a subject is an epistemic agent model that functions as the unit of identification. Nondual states belong to the class of conscious states where this function has been suspended. But as we will discover in the next two chapters, they are much more than mere “states”: Nonduality is a global *mode* of consciously knowing the world.

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# The Elephant and the Blind

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

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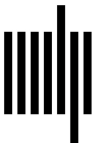
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