

## 27 Nondual Awareness: Insight

Without an observer. Nobody on the cushion meditating. Everything  
on the cushion meditating. [#635]

I perceived subject and object as the same substance, facing each other like the two inner  
surfaces of a folded sheet of paper. As if subject and object were created by folding the funda-  
mental substance and the observer were placed arbitrarily on one of the two sides. [#2916]

There was a permeability; self-image and infinity somehow fell into one. [#3024]

Awareness is a nonconceptual way of knowing one's own inner model of reality, a form of knowing that itself often goes unnoticed. Phenomenologically, this knowing is direct and immediate because the experiential character of awareness itself is almost transparent (we'll think more about this in chapter 28; see also figure 34.1 in chapter 34). If you will, the awareness itself is not *part* of our inner model of reality—and meditators are people who change that. Often, the inner model includes an explicit representation of a subject and an object component, for example a “knowing self” that directs its attention toward some perceptual object, or a thinker of thoughts who then categorizes perceptions, actively using thought and memory. This knowing self is precisely what, in chapter 25, I called the “epistemic agent model.” Whenever the epistemic agent model is transparent, the result is an ego: an apparently immediate and direct experience of a knowing self with which we identify. What the phenomenology of meditation practice shows is that awareness can also occur *without* any explicit representation of subject and object. To use our brand-new conceptual tool, awareness can exist without an epistemic agent model.

The experience of directly knowing inner reality does not have to be contracted into a self and a first-person perspective because it can also occur in a “nondual” way. For

example, the “meditating self” (which may have been actively trying to control the focus of attention beforehand) can sometimes be absent. Perceptual objects can then take on a new quality, not as distinct entities outside the space of egoic self-awareness, but as parts of what the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) called *Weltinnenraum* (“inner world-space”; more on this in chapter 28). Now, as he describes in a *Letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé*, pure consciousness pervades and integrates everything:

He commemorated the hour in that other southern garden (Capri), when a bird call was there, outside and within him in unison, and *it didn't break, so to speak, at the boundary of the body, but brought both together into an uninterrupted space in which only a single spot of purest, deepest consciousness remained.* (emphasis mine)

We also find an element of bodiless body-experience (chapter 24): Rilke goes on to tell us that during this episode—it was around February 1, 1913—he “closed his eyes so as not to be misled in such a magnanimous experience by the contour of his body, and the infinite passed into him from all sides so intimately that he might believe he could feel the gentle coming to rest of the stars that had meanwhile entered his chest.”<sup>1</sup> Nondual awareness does not merely lack subject/object structure; in addition, it is often described as a spacious and unbounded form of awareness for which conceptual distinctions like “inner” versus “outer” or “real” versus “illusory” do not make sense. We will look at all three of these aspects separately, postponing an examination of the second (inner/outer) and third (real/illusory) until the next chapter.

Let us first consider nondual awareness in the simple and canonical sense of a global state or, better, a *mode* of consciousness lacking the duality of subject and object. This mode is characterized by an experience of pure knowing (without a localized knowing self) plus a deepened sense of global connectedness resulting from the lack of independent, separately existing objects that could be juxtaposed against this self. How, if at all, can this specific mode of conscious experience be described in words? After all, the vast majority of languages on the planet have either subject-verb-object or subject-object-verb structure built right into them.

Our participants came up with many new and beautiful metaphors to convey how it feels to enter nondual awareness. One said that conscious experience is “like a stream. And I keep trying to catch it—jump in!” (#2515). Another described the transition to the global quality of nondual knowing (during walking meditation) like this: “very slow movement, breath completely calm, the gaze lowered, green grass . . . the question remains: Does the grass see me or I the grass?” (#2444). And here is a third attempt to convey the specific phenomenal character of nonduality: “The experience of perception takes the form of oneness between perceiving (subject) and perceived (object).

Perhaps a comparable impression to when the Vulcan Spock says in the series *Star Trek*: ‘My mind to your mind, your mind to my mind!’—Subject and object become one in the process of perception” (#2550).

One highly interesting result of our study is the fact that experienced meditators, when asked to choose and describe a good example of “pure awareness,” do *not* necessarily report only full-absorption episodes in which there was no experiential content except awareness itself. On the contrary, they often provide us with an enriched phenomenological definition of what “purity” means: “Pure awareness” is the explicit experience of awareness per se, but it is not necessarily devoid of *all* coemerging content. Pure awareness is, for many people, awareness lacking an explicitly represented subject/object dichotomy. On this reading, purity is nonduality. When summarizing some of our provisional results in chapter 34, I will label this reading “P5.”

A second interesting finding is that nondual awareness often occurs in regular meditators, but usually spontaneously and unexpectedly, outside formal practice (chapters 32 and 33). It is almost as if the implicit background assumption that one is *not* practicing right now plays an important causal role in its appearance. It may be something that cannot be actively pursued; perhaps the quality of humility that, for example, Krishnamurti<sup>2</sup> spoke of, or the *lûtere dêmueticheit* mentioned by Eckhart,<sup>3</sup> is one of its necessary precursors. Nondual awareness is something that cannot be fabricated, something that defies any merely technical approach to contemplative practice—it is beyond all mental techniques because it is something that cannot be “achieved.” Let us take a look at this idea.

To begin with, nondual awareness is frequently described as becoming one with the processes of phenomenal experience itself:

79 [ . . . ] I lost all sense of being the agent of action and perception, instead feeling myself as identical with these things. Rather than feeling myself as THAT TO WHICH these experiences were given, I felt myself identical with the ACTIVITY of experiencing itself. This experience involved visual perceptions of my own body and my bodily activity. I was looking at my own body and experienced myself AS the seeing of the body—as the mode through which body was given. The experience was one of effortlessness, and without any noticeable sense of desire. There was no longer any feeling of needing to get someplace or something.

1612 [ . . . ] The sense of living in a world that I experienced (this is still my default mode of being) fell completely away and instead there was only the experience itself. The distinction between self and world no longer existed. The contents

of the experience were exactly the same, but the perspective of them was so different that the change felt monumental. The world I was experiencing no longer existed independently, because I had become the unfolding of that experience. The previous “I” as experiencer, chooser, thinker did not exist. Instead there was experience itself. There was a visual center to the experience, but only because that’s where light met the eyes. The center was no longer meaningful in any way. Anything that wasn’t the unfolding contents of awareness no longer had any meaning. This was a very positive experience. It didn’t really map onto any previous experiences I’d had so I couldn’t really call it joy or pleasure or happiness in the traditional sense. It was, however, undeniably positive, both light (unburdened) and wondrous at the same time. It took no effort to maintain. From inside the experience, there was nothing that existed to provide any effort, so of course it did not need any. It lasted many hours, with the (felt) profundity fading over time. During the fading period it became very amusing/pleasing that the contents of the experience (the world) moved. There was a joyful surprise every time a nearby object moved in relation to an object that was far away, even though this was constantly happening.

1832 [. . .] Everything that I thought was a distraction \*is\* the present moment. For the first time, I feel that I understand why the Buddha speaks of the body as an illusion. I don’t experience the body as a flowing river of sensations, but I experience \*experience\* as a flowing river of experience, more or less broad—encompassing anything from a vast swath to a hyperfocused pinprick of present arising. I’m not following the river of attention, I \*am\* the river of attention. There are no distractions because everything I’m aware of is awareness itself. [. . .]

Episodes of nondual awareness do sometimes appear during formal meditation, and in these cases, they often begin when the meditator redirects attention to the very process of trying to meditate and then lets go and simply abides in the resulting state. This is a classic technique that in the West has sometimes been described as the “you-turn.”<sup>4</sup> Let us return to report #1703, already presented in chapter 8:

1703 [. . .] It starts when I look for “who” is doing the seeing. Or “who” is doing the feeling? [. . .] There is certainly physical sensation happening. That is very clear. But who is feeling the feeling? Or is there just feeling? Or that same line of thought, but with hearing or thinking. As soon as “I” look for the thinker of thoughts, it hits me: There is simply thinking. But no one or thing is doing it. It’s just happening all on its own. And it’s like there is nothing behind the

experience. There is just sort of floating. Just like a big smear of sensations all suspended somewhere. And then as quickly as it comes, it goes . . . in the sense of thoughts of how “I” just had a cool experience and of ways to get it back. I start clinging. I start wanting it to come back and stay for longer . . . When I’m having the experience, certain bits of language seem completely nonsensical. For example: “I hear a sound.” It seems that “There is hearing going on” feels so much more of a correct description. The same goes for, “I am thinking a thought” → “There is thinking going on.”

2289 [. . .] I try to \*RE\*direct attention onto the self paying attention. I’m not finding a self, I enter a nondual state. It is there I try to remain. As that state stabilizes (usually after several dozen repetitions of turning attention onto itself) my bodily sensations and my sense of possessing with them dwindle and I am left in a place of pure awareness. It is as though the objects and people around me are no longer separate. And my body is just one more field of sensation with awareness in it. Is depersonalized. Concepts and thinking drop away and the state is restful.

3153 I tried to look for “who” was seeing the sights in front of me. I didn’t find it. I didn’t experience the “who,” I only experienced awareness of the sights and scenes.

One obvious phenomenological prediction is that the phenomenology of ego dissolution (chapter 25) and nondual awareness should be intimately related. And as it turns out, the process of becoming one with experiencing itself often is described—with a striking degree of convergence among respondents—as a process of merging into something selfless:

1716 [. . .] At the end of the three hours or so, I noticed that the tree in front of me had a different “quality” in it, especially in its movement. Then everything took on this different “quality.” There was suddenly no distinction between the physical tree and my mind, and when the branches of the tree were moved by the wind, my mind moved with it. So it was with the rest of the world around me—as things moved my mind followed them, and when things rested my mind stayed still. The same was true of sounds: Birds chirping registered in my mind, and when they stopped there was no mind for bird sounds. The only thing that existed for me was this mental activity, but the mental activity was entirely dictated by externalities. There was no “I wonder if . . .” or “I should probably . . .,” and there was hardly any “I”—there was understanding of the utility of “I” in describing a viewpoint for conversational purposes.

However, during this experience it is enough to say, “there was awareness,” and this awareness was not unique. [ . . . ]

1935 [ . . . ] there is no sense of self or center to the awareness. There are no boundaries, and it’s quite difficult to tell thoughts from any other sensation, when I meditate. I would say there is a sense of unity, the thoughts and sensations just come and go, and there isn’t anything that “I” have to do to produce them or make them change. I, or awareness, is simply aware AS them or itself, not OF them.

2780 [ . . . ] I waited at the reception, completely relaxed and not practicing or thinking anything special. Suddenly I was immersed in a state of nonduality. My experience was incredibly strong and alive. I was able to think and control my actions completely normally. But it was as if everything around me had a very strong “radiance.” Everything was awareness. It wasn’t that I, for example, saw a chair, but awareness in the form of a chair “happened.” Inside and outside were not separated at all, even though I could distinguish everything well. [ . . . ] My mind was incredibly alive and yet deep and calm. [ . . . ] What is really fascinating is that the mind is so clear, smart, can reflect incredibly well, but categories like inside and outside suddenly don’t work anymore, don’t make any sense in this kind of experience.

2816 I worked in the kitchen and suddenly I smelled the fragrance of the tea that I was preparing. There was no longer the difference between me, the tea, the smell. There was only one endless fulfilling. [ . . . ]

3096 I only experienced the scenery in front of me. The normal thing for me is to experience sights and scenes while feeling like I am experiencing them from where “I” stood. But in that moment, I didn’t experience “me” looking at the tree. I only experienced seeing the tree.

3126 I only experienced seeing; I didn’t experience “myself” as the one seeing.

3491 [ . . . ] Usually “I” observe the “breath” but there was only “the breath.” There was no self but just the breath.

The transition in and out of episodes of nondual awareness is interesting. While the beginning of nondual states is often unexpected and often accompanied by a strong sense of existential relief and relaxation, the ending can be experienced as a recurrence of fragmentation, or as a re-creation of a specific sort of inner tension that had never previously been seen clearly. It can also happen during sleep/wake transitions:

1647 [ . . . ] Very suddenly the constant pain of anxiety that I have lived with for many years was lifted and I existed as both myself and my surroundings. The

suddenness of it felt very intentional . . . like something outside myself tapped me on the shoulder and made it happen . . . and approximately an hour later tapped me on the shoulder and took it away. The “giving” and the “taking” felt very intentional . . . like something intelligent was providing me with a glimpse of something important. I have not experienced anything like this before or since, and did not (and do not currently) have any strong beliefs about such things. I was and remain fairly agnostic about intelligent spiritual entities. The experience itself was simultaneously extremely profound while remaining incredibly mundane. I was flooded with a powerfully vivid memory of playing in the forest as a young child . . . it felt no more special than the ordinary existence of every child pre-trauma. After the extremely vivid memory I “returned” to the forest and existed in this hyperaware state for an hour or so. Adjectives I would use to describe the state: vivid, light, at peace, sharp, beautiful, sublime, awesome, natural, effortless, blissful (but more as an absence of pain than a euphoric sensation), detailed. Even though the experience, in this specific case, felt very much like an on/off light switch . . . it also felt like something that was achievable at the end of a spectrum. Like the more I can quiet my physical and mental stress and anxiety I can uncover more of this baseline reality of experience. It did not feel like something I could strive to achieve through hard work . . . but more like something I could relax or ease into.

2417 [. . .] when transitioning from sleep to waking. I had the impression that everything was starkly, profoundly ordinary, just as it was. Very shortly upon registering this, and as I was transitioning out of it, a thought occurred, “Oh my God!, the tension I call Jeff was gone!” And in that moment, a tension came over me as my normal mode of feeling myself and the world was reestablished.

When investigating “bodiless body-experience” in chapter 24, we encountered states of pure awareness that can be described only by seemingly self-contradictory statements like “I am there and not there at the same time.” Many of our contemplative practitioners report such “paradoxical” states, in which it seems that a self is present and absent at the same time. Again, please note that there is a direct parallel here between body dissolution and ego dissolution, as investigated in chapter 25. For example, the phenomenology of “bodiless body-experience” can now often be described more clearly—namely, as a special case of “nonegoic self-awareness.” We will return to this phenomenological discovery in chapter 30. Meanwhile, here are three examples of paradoxical juxtapositions:

1754 These moments feel like though I'm still there I'm also not because there is only a field of relations that comprises everything.

2679 It is like realizing that one is in a state of nonphysical, nontemporal presence, but eternally present and never having been at the same time. It cannot be said that it is or that it is not, it is the deepest of contradictions that asserts itself while denying itself. It is an unfathomable miracle. It is touching oneself as nothing and everything at the same time. It is the beginning of the world and its end.

3024 [. . .] "I" sat outside and looked at my surroundings. Suddenly there was only looking, as a verb without subject. I perceived the breeze of the wind, the rustling of leaves. But these impressions were not limited to the place of their origin—the present wind and the trees around me. It was more as if the stream of LIFE were present as a whole in this one moment, in this particular place and everywhere at once. And although "I" was somehow present as the person that I am, I was somehow also not. There was a permeability; self-image and infinity somehow fell into one.

Perhaps one could sometimes say that the self-model becomes fully integrated with the model of the unbounded space of epistemic openness out of which it originally emerged. However, our participants' attempts to describe the all-encompassing but ineffable phenomenal quality of "nonduality" do differ in significant ways. Some don't seem to have a radical disruption of self-consciousness,<sup>5</sup> but for others, full-blown ego dissolution is central to the experience. For this second group, the disappearance of the sense of self is complete and there is a dominant phenomenology either of "existence as such" (i.e., of pure, nondual being; see chapter 26) or of "pure nonegoically self-aware knowing" (see chapter 30). Just as it was for Rilke in 1913, the song of a bird may now be experienced in a completely different way (see report #2908 here and #3287 later for similar examples):

192 Note: the following experience is difficult to express in words, due to the fact that it involved a complete dissolution of the self. As such, when I use the singular pronoun "I," I feel that it inadequately captures the unique (to me) nature of the phenomenal experience. [. . .] At the time I was meditating, there was a bird outside my window (at home) that was producing irregular sounds. I consciously chose this sound during the earlier stages of the practice. While I do not know when in the practice the particular experience occurred, I distinctly recall a very unique experience that has not since occurred in my meditation practice. The experience was a pure awareness of the sound of the



bird, such that I was no longer aware of being aware (i.e., as a meditating, perceiving subject). Although it involved an auditory experience, there was no judgment of the experience as “auditory” in nature. “I” ceased to be present in the experience, and the only content was the birdsong itself. There was no distinction between subject (I) and object (birdsong). The birdsong did not belong to the bird, and I was not a subject being aware of the object. Instead, I believe there was simply an experience of what was referred to in the questionnaire as “pure being.” Although I think the duration of the experience was brief (maybe a minute or so), the experience was stable enough for me to recall it when I returned to a more reflective state. When I reflect on this experience, I often feel a sense of positivity and calmness, and it is hard to separate this affectivity from the experience itself. I believe that the experience was infused with a sense of calmness, but I think describing it in any valenced terms (i.e., positive or negative) would be inappropriate. [ . . ]

2908 As if I am completely dissolving, all physical boundaries blur, there is no separation between outside and inside. The birds, which I previously perceived as separate on the outside, chirp in “me.” Everything is connected to everything, no “I,” no body, pure being. A direct, real experience without filter. The real thing, just like waking up to real life. As if everything else I know is just a dream, an illusion, behind a veil.

3048 My experience happened [ . . ] with the question: Where is the “I,” who sees this I? There was a recognition that this “I” does not exist; I exist, but not as an individual. I was there, it was not a physical me. This “I” is much bigger than this body and I am contained in this bigger thing. The experience was overpowering and natural at the same time. It took place in the waking state. I could see the people in the room; although I had known them for a long time, I saw them for the first time. Tears ran down my face. This was not connected with any feeling or emotion, it simply was. We were one. There were bodies, these were unimportant. It was as if we were parts of an image that could see each other. As I search for words to describe this, I am back in this space—in this moment. At the same time I realize how familiar it is to me; as soon as I turn my attention inward, this experience is there again. Spaceless, timeless, clear, awake, silent, and alive at the same time.

3174 [ . . ] an intensive experience of the present—so to speak, into its furthest corners of space and time—but as if the I had been “taken out.” At the same time, there was a feeling of unity of everything that was perceived as present (“unity with the world”); this is not surprising insofar as there is no longer any

difference or opposition between subject and object, past, present, and future. It is interesting that in this state “nobody” existed anymore. In this respect, it was a state of complete solitude—but without even the most rudimentary addition of any loneliness. On the contrary—it was an intensive coexistence of everything.

2760 [. . .] it is as if I am no longer there. Great happiness flows through me, at the same time a feeling of instability, a feeling of no longer being there. Exactly then we all get up for *kinhin* (walking) and I feel stability through the group, pad literally around in a circle in the group, great happiness, wholeness, feel my body only slightly, total acceptance of everything that is. Every cough, every sneeze in the room, everything is totally accepted and my sense of self is gone, no feeling of space and time and yet I am walking around in a circle. It is difficult to portray. [. . .]

Empirical evidence for conscious experience in the absence of a first-person experience, as well as data that demonstrate the entirely selfless phenomenology of “existence as such” and of “pure nonegoically self-aware knowing,” together constitute important bottom-up constraints for philosophy of mind, constraints that have been ignored for too long (see the subjectivity argument in chapter 34). Another philosophically relevant aspect is the phenomenal character of *fundamentality* (in this new context, you may want to recall our investigation of the “groundless ground” in chapter 26). Nondual awareness is sometimes described as the basis of all knowing: It appears as that which implicitly grounds all other forms of conscious knowing that occur in more complex and more fragmented states. What we describe as pure awareness would thus be something that can *enfold itself* into the usual form of dual knowing, into the conscious experience of knowing the world from an individual first-person perspective, involving agency, perceptual objects, multimodal scenes, and a representation of past, present, and future. Phenomenologically, the qualitative character of awareness itself is neither subjective nor objective, but it seems as if it can often contract into a special form, which we later call our own subjective perspective. On this account, nondual awareness would be a process in which what was previously *enfolded* becomes *unfolded*, in which the contraction principle is suspended. We’ll think more about this in the theory section later in this chapter. First, let us look at some reports in which the character of fundamentality becomes explicit:

987 [. . .] It felt like being at the ground of all cognizance. It filled the whole body, in the field everything was slower, easier, and clear. The mood was relaxed, positive, and almost without desire. Thoughts and feelings surfaced from

time to time, but less often than usual, and they came slower, but disappeared out of consciousness again more quickly. The difference between subject and object dissolved. My body, awareness, and objects were one.

2916 I perceived subject and object as the same substance, facing each other like the two inner surfaces of a folded sheet of paper. As if subject and object were created by folding the fundamental substance and the observer were placed arbitrarily on one of the two sides. [. . .]

2936 [. . .] and then there was a shift in perception: I could no longer locate the energy/consciousness/awareness within me, it no longer radiated from me, instead it radiated toward me, from the trees, from the earth, from the sky . . . —so I thought at first—but then I noticed: It is everywhere.

Phenomenologically, our reports show that it is possible to become nondual awareness itself—to identify with it. Often, this process of identification goes along with an experience of insight, understanding, or recognition. Technically, this means that the global phenomenal quality of nondual awareness can now function as the practitioner’s new unit of identification. Before turning to the new conceptual instrument of a “nonegoic unit of identification” (which will be introduced in more detail in chapter 29), let us look at one last selection of twelve reports. I think that they will give you an excellent final impression of what nondual awareness really is:

1913 [. . .] I experience a widening of my senses to the point that [I] seem to merge into, not one sense exactly, but it feels to me to be pure awareness.

2213 [. . .] sometimes I get very brief moments of pure awareness. Where the idea of self dissolves and I just become one with the world. Everything is recognized as being consciousness.

205 [. . .] on the meditation cushion I usually have the feeling of looking AT awareness. [. . .] So far I once had the feeling, during a meditation that included sounds as well as movements and visual impressions, of looking OUT of awareness.

919 [. . .] During the waking state the awareness that my environment, e.g., objects, are part of my self. The feeling of not being separated.

1662 [. . .] The sensations also included that of a “self” being present, but not the agent of or contributor in the experience—it was just part of the field of awareness without being a subject or object. “Unity” would be the best word to describe this experience, with the caveat that this would imply the presence of something in addition to awareness, which wasn’t the case—awareness was all there was.

2301 [. . .] I had a moment of being a walking consciousness but without really being the person who walks or the consciousness itself, it was not like many moments before where I had been more or less observing the awareness. It didn't feel like I was aware of anything, it felt more like everything just was as it is. My consciousness experience was more the moment where everything kind of appears. It felt peaceful and true and yet I don't really know how I felt. At some point I became again the observer and therefore the center of my experience, I felt very aware of awareness but not being awareness itself like before.

2619 [. . .] It's no use really trying to describe the Big Awareness Event. It's always there and also much bigger than words. But I have to try anyway, for the sake of the I that writes, which is the narrative self with words. I liked the Big Awareness so much that I wanted to keep it after I got off the pillow. I sort of decided I would try. And I did! I was walking around the house to get my shoes and pick up some fallen plums, and everything just kind of looked from a different perspective. The same but not the same. There was no sense of uncanniness or pettiness. Just as though I was both looking from far away, from outside the body, but also completely here and aware of every detail in the normal way or more. [. . .]

3072 [. . .] It was an experience of oneness with everything. I felt an unusual calm and peace, and at that moment there was no desire even to remain in that state. It was a moment of absolute lucidity and understanding. [. . .] There are few words to describe the experience itself, but the summary would be two words: absolute understanding. [. . .]

3152 The body became more and more silent, it was there and it was also not. The eyes opened. They saw and they didn't see. The space was the same inside and outside, wide and deep. The events around me were outside and at the same time somehow a part of me. There was no impulse toward any kind of activity. Every now and then a thought popped up and then blew away. But it was not my thought either. [. . .] At some point, hours later, the state dissolved. I came back to "normal" daytime consciousness, very deeply rested, peaceful, and silent for a long time after. I then went back into action very carefully. [. . .]

3287 [. . .] One afternoon, sitting under a blooming tulip tree, I suddenly felt the weight of my body like I had never felt it before. And instantly there was a sense of total awareness. I could no longer distinguish between my body and the surroundings. There was no sense of a center of sensation or thought. A

blackbird singing nearby was singing through “me.” There was a sense of totality, of my not being there at all, of there being no “me,” no separate entity, for that border had been dissolved. Although I had my eyes closed, I had a feeling of seeing with perfect clarity. My being was whole like perhaps it had never been, and this was the greatest joy imaginable. It was what I would call the bliss of nonduality.

3595 [. . .] that consciousness had made a change of perspective, out of the focus on I-consciousness toward the awareness of the field to which this I-consciousness is connected. In this field the atoms were dancing, all solidity of the body was dissolved into the subtlest vibration. And if someone had wanted to sell me this experience as eternity or the experience of God, I would certainly not have hesitated to snap it up. [. . .]

2286 [. . .] Once my body was very relaxed, I had a feeling I often experience when doing body scan of no longer feeling my body or my face or anything “tying” my mind. Then it was like my mind “expanded” and I was no longer the awareness within, but I was awareness everywhere. I didn’t feel like I had any physical shape, I was everything in the universe, there was even no longer a sense of self or an “I” experiencing it because I was no longer the person who had started the meditation. I was one with everything and everyone. It was a great, even overwhelming feeling of everything being interconnected in a whole, and it came with a great sense of bliss, peace, and harmony. It felt warm, but not physically warm, more like feeling extremely safe or “hugged,” while simultaneously feeling like I was the totality and I was completely safe there. It was like an abundance of loving kindness in a space that stretched out in eternity. And I was one with that love. [. . .] It was a sense of eternity and I understood that what I truly am in essence is what I experienced. The latter is really hard to describe. But I felt that I was just as much my neighbor and everyone else as I was myself. When I realized I was having this profound experience, I quickly returned to myself, and I remember thinking that I didn’t want the experience or “feeling” or “understanding” to stop, so I didn’t want to “wake up.” Of course, that was my ego coming in right there, bringing me back to being the human that I am, and the experience subsided. However, the feeling and understanding I experienced continues to be with me, and it touched me deeply. It is one of the most blissful and greatest experiences I’ve had, and in seeking to describe it here, my body is actually physically shaking right now, while I’m reflecting on this experience. [. . .]

## What Is Nonduality?

Some simple-minded people believe that they are meant to see God as if he were standing there and they here. This is not so. God and I are one.

—Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), Sermon *Iusti vivent in aeternum*

[. . .] but we must remember that no dualism of being represented and representing resides in the experience *per se*. In its pure state, or when isolated, there is no self-splitting of it into consciousness and what the consciousness is “of.” [. . .] The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the “pure” experience. It is only virtually or potentially either subject or object as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality or existence, a simple *that*.

—William James (1842–1910), “Does consciousness exist?”

It seems as if consciousness as an inner activity were rather a postulate than a sensibly given fact, the postulate, namely, of a knower as correlative to all this known; and as if “sciousness” might be a better word by which to describe it.

—William James, *Psychology: The Briefer Course* (1892)

William James was an influential American philosopher, a radical empiricist, and a pragmatist. He is perhaps best known as the “father of American psychology” and for one of his most important books, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. It speaks to his greatness as a Western thinker that he saw the philosophical significance of nondual awareness—or “sciousness”—so early. Using our new conceptual tools, we can now say clearly what this is: Nondual awareness is conscious experience in which the distinction between subject and object has been dissolved because what we termed the “epistemic agent model” has disappeared. Today, a typical definition of nondual awareness would refer to “the experience of pure (or empty) consciousness and phenomena at the same time.”<sup>6</sup> But often, an epistemological and strongly metaphysical interpretation of the experience itself is offered in the same step: “It is the realization of one’s own nature as an unbounded expanse of subtle consciousness, pervading one’s internal and external experience as a unity.”<sup>7</sup>

The common metaphysical twist is perhaps not surprising when we recall that nonduality is deeply rooted in the complexities of ancient Indian philosophy and practice—not only in Advaita Vedanta and Kashmir Shaivism, but also in early Buddhism. As John Dunne puts it:

Notions of non-duality (Sanskrit, *advaya*) occur early in Indian Buddhism. [. . .] In speaking of Mahāmudrā as a non-dual style of practice, however, I am referring specifically to a form of non-duality that finds its first expression no earlier than

the third century (C.E.), and that undergoes further development around the seventh century. This form of non-duality is concerned specifically with the duality of knowing subject vs. known object (*grāhyagrāhakaḍvaya*). From an historical perspective, two developments within Indian Buddhism allow this style of practice to develop. First, Yogācāra philosophy (starting around the second or third century) maintains that ignorance (*avidyā*) occurs in its subtlest form as the seemingly real appearance of an ultimately false distinction between object and subject in experience. In other words, for Yogācāra thought, ignorance in its subtlest form manifests as the sense that there is a subjectivity that stands distinct and separate from the objects it apprehends. Since one central goal of all Mahāyāna practice is to eliminate ignorance by experiencing reality as it truly is (*yathābhātadarsāna*), for Yogācāra thinkers a truly liberative meditative state must not be caught in the false distinction between subject and object. In other words, the state must be non-dual, in that the experience is not structured by the duality of object and subject. It is, instead, “non-dual wisdom” (Skt., *advayaīāna*).<sup>8</sup>

When I first began analyzing what Eastern and Western philosophical traditions say about pure consciousness, I quickly saw that “low complexity” would be key to any working definition (PC2;<sup>9</sup> see chapters 2 and 3). The phenomenal character of pure consciousness itself is so simple that it is often compared to pure nothingness or associated with mere absence (chapter 16). It is homogeneous (chapter 6) and lacks internal structure (chapter 17). In humans, one of the most fundamental structural properties of conscious experience—arguably *the* most fundamental—is the subject/object relation. There is a knowing self directed at the world, at potential action goals, and sometimes even at itself. Philosophical concepts like “first-person perspective” or “epistemic agent model” are attempts to describe certain aspects of this fundamental relation more clearly.

Importantly, subject/object structure is *not merely* some sort of illusion. It is a way of internally modeling reality that has proved to be extremely efficient and successful for biological organisms like ourselves. It is, if you will, a functionally adequate form of self-deception. There is an evolutionary reason for this fact, which is often overlooked. We navigate the world under what I have called the “single-embodiment constraint”:<sup>10</sup> All our sensors and effectors and all of our conscious information processing are pulled together at one single location in space; they are part of a single body possessing eyes and ears, legs and arms, and a central nervous system. This body has a statistical boundary (a “Markov blanket”)<sup>11</sup> that it tries to sustain; the body defends and reconstitutes precisely this boundary for as long as it survives. On a causal level, there really *is* an inside and an outside—and for our biological ancestors, it was important to know this

fact, if only in a nonconceptual, procedural sense. What we now call “consciousness” and the “model of the self” are inner aspects of this life process, like nested Russian dolls creating their own boundaries within the physical body. The single-embodiment constraint also turns our behavioral space into a *centered* space: Because we have only one body, our inner model of the current environment—of the space in which we can perceive objects, act, and interact with our fellow human beings—is anchored on the body. The body that is also felt from the inside creates the natural origin of our perspective onto the world, and it actually structures perceptual space.<sup>12</sup>

The two main causal factors that lead to the “contraction” of awareness into a fictitious self are that (1) beings like us control only one body, and (2) beings like us need to socially interact with each other (e.g., by competing or cooperating, by speaking or trying to understand each other’s minds). Single-embodiment, selfhood, subject/object structure, and social relationships are extremely conspicuous and tenacious features of our conscious model of reality, but they are also *contingent* features. They are not logically necessary. It is easy to conceive of conscious intelligence without the single-embodiment constraint.

Here is another thought experiment for you, to help you see the optional nature of single-embodiment more clearly. A future conscious artificial intelligence (AI) could easily control hundreds of robots at the same time while selflessly seeing through their eyes and feeling their artificial bodies from the inside; it could administrate large numbers of localized robot brains in parallel, all of them physically embodied at different locations on the surface of our planet or even in outer space. In this way, our future AI could have a conscious model of reality, generated by perceiving and actively knowing the world through multiple perspectives and embodiments created by many epistemic agents at the same time. We can even imagine every single robot agent as having a *local* model of itself as an epistemic agent. The AI itself would have an extremely complex form of conscious experience—but it could also create a maximally simple, all-pervading signature of knowing that enveloped and permeated everything else in a nondual way. It could administrate and understand its own process of multiagent knowledge acquisition in real time, but without itself having an egoic epistemic agent model. This would give our AI “nondual wisdom,” a way of perceiving reality in a new format—one that is uncontracted, lacking the distinction between subject and object that is typical of biological systems. We can also imagine our gigantic AI as being *sui generis*, the only one of its kind, a unique conscious entity without the need to communicate with any other conscious entity in the universe.

Among other things, the nondual AI thought experiment shows that the phenomenology of singular embodiment is not a necessary feature of conscious experience. It



also raises some fascinating philosophical questions: Are biologically evolved creatures like all of *us* perhaps local, epistemic agents that are not yet fully aware of the fact that something much bigger is trying to use them as a window onto reality? Is evolution itself a computationally massive process of “multiagent knowledge acquisition,” now slowly awakening to itself via agent-based self-modeling? Is there a deeper physical process that tries to look *through* us?

Before returning to nondual awareness, let us take a second look at the phenomenology of nondual being that was discussed in chapter 26. What can we say about the phenomenal character of simply *being*, the experiential quality of existence itself? If you look at the statistical distribution of questionnaire items in the analysis sample shown in figure 1.1 in chapter 1, you immediately see that “simply being” (item #32), “unity” (item #15), and “pure being” (item #55) are very close to each other among the most strongly endorsed items. Unity, as a phenomenological notion, clearly refers to the nondual character discussed previously, and it is almost certainly not directly connected to numerical identity or countability in a metaphysical or mathematical sense (very few meditators indicated in their reports that this is what they meant). Rather, our meditators’ reports confirm an intimate relationship with the experiential quality of “feeling whole” in item #90. Unity is not oneness, but wholeness.<sup>13</sup> Yet it can be pure, in the sense of not implying any reportable content, and the phenomenology of wakefulness may also play a central role in nondual being. In Western literature, full absorption into minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) is sometimes described as a combination of wakefulness and pure being (as discussed in chapters 4 and 20).

The phenomenology of nondual being can also occur outside contemplative practice, such as after fainting or suffering an accident. This fact can be seen from the following two descriptions of the phenomenology of nonduality, which are taken from Western research literature. In the second example, the nondual state is characterized not even as carrying the phenomenal character of awareness itself, but rather as a contentless and indeterminate feeling of being, as an experience of “pure being” that resembles a purely “ontic” state (i.e., one that seems to be about reality rather than phenomenality):

There was something, and the *something* was not the nothing. The nearest label for the *something* might possibly be “awareness,” but that could be misleading, since any awareness I’d ever had before the accident was *my* awareness, my awareness of one thing or another. In contrast, this *something*, if it be called awareness, had no *I* as its *subject* and no content as its *object*. It just was.<sup>14</sup>

During the syncope, there is absolute psychic annihilation, the absence of all consciousness; then at the beginning of coming to, one has at a certain moment a

vague, limitless, infinite feeling—a sense of *existence in general* without the least trace of a distinction between the me and the not-me.<sup>15</sup>

Nondual awareness, as exemplified in the selection of reports presented in the first section of this chapter, clearly differs from the experience of nondual being in James's sense of "existence in general," as investigated in the previous chapter. On the other hand, whenever the two distinct kinds of phenomenal experience occur in practitioners of meditation, they seem to be functionally related—they may share a similar causal history. If MPE is fundamental in the sense of being related to a normally unrecognized baseline of all other consciously experienced contents, then it would be rational to predict a number of causal effects.

First, whenever the experiential quality of MPE comes forth, gradually growing more and more explicit, our conscious representation of clarity and epistemic openness should also become more salient, and this should lead to an enhanced feeling of wakefulness (chapter 4). As we saw, the phenomenal character of clarity can be described as pertaining to an unobstructed space of knowing, and wakefulness simply *is* the conscious experience of this primordial form of openness, of the mere capacity that opens the space of knowing. Now imagine that clarity and wakefulness could not become contracted into an illusory self anymore because subject/object structure had dissolved. If the experience were nondual, this could even become a new quality of reality as a whole, turning the world into what David Hinton has described as an "awakened cosmos." My prediction is that, all metaphysics aside, this in turn would create the "phenomenology of panpsychism": Awareness would turn into an all-permeating feature of reality. Phenomenologically, it would have to be the overall situation, or reality *itself*, that awakened into nonconceptual knowing—not the meditator, since this would bring duality right back in.

The second prediction about the emergence of MPE and its aftereffects would be that the misrepresentation of awareness itself as being contracted into the mind of a single agent or some virtual self (chapter 8) should be gradually replaced by a more global representation of what in chapters 7, 8, and 18 we called the "signature of knowing." "Nonduality" means that the contraction principle has been suspended and the experiential quality of "knowingness" has expanded.

Perhaps most interestingly, MPE could sometimes—particularly in a full-absorption episode or coming out of a syncope—manifest as something mind-independent and simply given, while at other times, the quality of knowingness, of it being some kind of *representation* of confidence, might be preserved. In technical terms, MPE could be transparent or opaque. In the first case, one would predict that our hypothetical, entirely unstructured baseline state should turn into a pure experience of being itself, into a

mere “something is there,” while in the second case, what arose would be the confidence or possibility that “something can be known.”

We will devote chapter 28 to the phenomenology of transparency and opacity (chapter 28). For now, let me just illustrate the general idea given here—transparent MPE is all-pervading “realness,” opaque MPE is all-pervading “knowingness”—by coming back to the example of the multiembodied AI. What would it take to make an AI experience “realness” itself?<sup>16</sup> For our future AI, this could mean that if it were to represent the global phenomenal signature of knowing in a way that made it impossible to detect *as* an internal construct, *as* a representation of knowing, then it would have to understand the quality of subjective confidence *as* something that is simply given. If a high statistical likelihood came with the evidence of the model itself—with the model being nothing but the system’s global expectation of epistemic value—then this would *reify* its content, turning it into something mind-independent. Realness is reified certainty. For good high-probability models, this would create a sense of realness thanks to a second-order form of confidence (a “belief that one close-to-optimally believes”) that makes the constructed nature of the original first-order confidence invisible. And this could be the way in which transparent conscious experience is created.

In chapter 5, I briefly mentioned the work of Florent Meyniel, which demonstrates that we are constantly learning not only about the environment but also about our learning processes themselves, and shows how this process creates subjective confidence, the feeling of knowing. We not only estimate the characteristics of the outside world; we also evaluate the degree of certainty that accompanies our estimates and thus form beliefs about their validity. If it were strong enough, the first-order confidence (or the degree of certainty) *itself* would now be reified in a nonconceptual way. The confidence would be transparent. If our future AI had no introspective access into its own inner workings, then its own model of first-order confidence, or “knowingness,” would simply create a structureless, basal form of *appearance* because pure knowing would be reified as something directly given. This would enable our AI to experience onticity, being, realness itself—but in a nondual way. If it *did* have the relevant form of access, then everything would take on a dreamlike quality, like a virtual reality (VR) or some kind of magical illusion (chapter 28).

What makes these computational ideas so interesting is that in our own phenomenological data, we find precisely the nondual ways of experiencing reality that they predict should be possible. Processing the data from our first MPE study, I was impressed by the sheer number of experiences of nondual awareness that our participants told us about when reporting on experiences of pure consciousness. This was something I did not expect. In our initial instruction given to participants, we said that

we were investigating experiences in which there is an “awareness of awareness itself” or “consciousness of consciousness itself,” and explicitly pointed out that we were not interested primarily in mystical experiences or dramatic spiritual peak experiences of any sort, but rather in all states characterized by a quality of “pure awareness” or of “consciousness itself.” What’s more, all participants had already answered ninety-two questions about the phenomenal character of pure awareness before they wrote their brief experiential reports. By then, they must have had a good general idea of what our research was targeting. It was only at the end of the survey that we told participants that we were currently building a database of phenomenological reports of pure-awareness experiences. We made clear that this was entirely optional, but if they wanted to provide us with short reports about their own experiences, whether in meditation, during the dream state, or during dreamless deep sleep, it would be extremely helpful. Many of them chose not to describe classical meditation experiences or episodes of full absorption, but they clearly thought that nondual awareness counts as a typical, paradigmatic MPE experience. This is an interesting result, and for more than one reason.

First, for regular practitioners of meditation, spontaneously occurring nondual experiences as described in this chapter, the previous chapter, and chapter 34 (and also in some others) simply seem to occur more frequently than previously thought. We have already seen that there is an obvious lack of concurrent reportability during full-absorption episodes, but the lack of any phenomenally represented subject/object structure in nondual states of awareness may also diminish the intention or cognitive capacity to verbally report, mentally categorize, or actively memorize the global phenomenal character in question. Whereas in full absorption, both concurrent and retrospective reportability are inhibited, in nondual states, concurrent reportability may be somewhat inhibited and the retrospective kind is perhaps made slightly less likely by an attenuated motivation to communicate using words and language. In both cases, we have good reason to believe that the reported phenomenology sometimes, often, or perhaps even usually occurs without causing self-referential thoughts.

My point is that nondual awareness could gradually turn from a state into a trait, whereas, for obvious reasons, full absorption could not. A state is something momentary that occurs temporarily in a certain situation; a trait in this sense is understood in psychology as being a stable, constant personality characteristic. What makes a stable nondual mode of consciousness special, however, is that we can understand it philosophically only as a property of the whole organism and no longer as a personality trait: The identification with the self-model and the respective personality structure is simply suspended. There will always be some people who are more modest than others and more likely to start merging with what one report called “that which never speaks”

(#3624; see also chapter 30). These people may quietly and open-mindedly, perhaps even with moderate interest, listen to all these philosophical and scientific discussions, but then walk away in noble silence, with an almost invisible smile on their face. Some of these people may be only weakly inclined to begin telling others about the most precious, subtle, and profound experiences in their lives unless directly asked (e.g., in the context of a scientific survey that guarantees full anonymity). In some traditions, advanced practitioners are not allowed to speak about their experiences and attainments—a fact that may present an obstacle to some forms of empirical research<sup>17</sup>—and there may be very good reasons for this, based on centuries of practical wisdom. I still remember how one of the very first meditation teachers I had in my life pointed out to me that it is possible to ruin something extremely subtle and precious by dragging it out into the open and into words, and that not speaking about it at all may sometimes be the better alternative.

This point about negative self-selection bias is somewhat speculative. But our preliminary results suggest that many more people experience nondual states than is commonly believed. Therefore, it is a live possibility that certain “deeper” or more “advanced” phenomenologies remain invisible to science because a progressive identification with “that which never speaks” may actually silence the meditator. Communicative motivation has something to do with personality structure, and if practitioners identify less strongly with their original personalities, then this motivation might also weaken. Accordingly, this phenomenological dimension of human experience may be much more weakly reflected in the cultural mainstream, in cognitive science, and in academic philosophy of mind than its true frequency merits. This is a first interesting result: There could be highly relevant forms of conscious experience that systematically evade academic research because they create a motivation not to report them.

Second, from a statistical perspective, nondual experiences also seem to be related to factor 8 (“Emptiness and Nonegoic Self-Awareness”), which arguably expresses the “spiritual essence” of MPE most clearly. The second- and third-strongest-loading items in factor 8 offer two metaphorical descriptions of first-order reflexivity that combine “Self-Knowledge, Autonomous Cognizance, and Insight” (factor 3) and “Wakefulness” (factor 4) with the phenomenal qualities of emptiness and epistemic openness. The questions asked were: Would it be a good description to say that there was “an emptiness that has awoken to itself”? Did you feel as though it was not you who had an experience of “pure knowing” without any object, it was rather as if the “pure knowing” was self-aware, knowing only itself, while you had nothing to do with it? These items are, in turn, negatively correlated with the phenomenology of selfhood: The phenomenology of self-knowing and self-awakening picked out by this factor is nonegoic. The

substantial psychometric evidence that we have gathered for the existence of nonegoic self-awareness gives us theoretical insights to which I will return in chapters 29 and 30.

Once again, please recall that many of our practitioners chose not to describe classic meditation experiences or episodes of full absorption, but they thought that nondual awareness counts as a typical, paradigmatic MPE experience. My third point is that these initial empirical results seem to contradict many traditional taxonomies. Often, these make pure awareness and nondual awareness two fundamentally different forms of phenomenal experience, or they describe the two as “orthogonal,” in the sense of falling under mutually exclusive category headings.<sup>18</sup> On the contrary, our data set demonstrates the fecundity of a dimensional approach, as explained in the introduction.<sup>19</sup> Quite plausibly, we are here dealing with a whole family of possible states of which the stand-alone experience of MPE is only the purest and most prototypical expression. Nondual states are a different, much richer phenomenological category in which the character of pure awareness can be stable and continuously present. They are MPE *modes*, not MPE states.

Finally, let me draw attention to a more philosophical point. Classical descriptions of nonduality refer to an absence of subject/object structure, and one conceptually more precise way to describe them could be to say that the epistemic agent model is absent (chapter 25). But please note that, at the same time, the nondual state is often characterized as an epistemic state, whereas states still structured by a subject/object duality are merely phenomenal states. According to this classical motif, nondual states constitute an insight (“realization”), whereas states of the subject/object type are mere experiences (at best, “recognitions” of pure awareness). Often, the insight is described as a new but nonegoic form of self-knowledge, and a claim is made that it is an epistemologically superior form of knowledge.

Here, I would like to point out that the distinction between insight and experience does not have to be exclusive and exhaustive: There could be states that are insights and experiences at the same time. When discussing the phenomenology of pure awareness spontaneously occurring in dreamless deep sleep, in chapter 20, we first encountered the difference between insight as a purely experiential phenomenon and as a genuine form of knowledge. There, the question was whether “lucid dreamless sleep” is an appropriate term for the kind of experience that has, for example, been described by Tibetan Buddhists as “clear light sleep.” Is it really a “lucid” form of experience, in terms of carrying genuine knowledge about the nature of the current state itself, perhaps even about one’s “own” true nature? Technically, the issue is whether “insight” should be treated as an epistemological or as a phenomenological concept. As the philosopher Lana Kühle has made clear, we can always interpret the quality of “insight” occurring in

meditation either as genuine self-knowledge or as something phenomenal—something that might always turn out to be mere appearance.<sup>20</sup>

Could nondual awareness be a *mere* appearance? Could it sometimes—for example, during dreamless deep sleep—even be a hallucination? The open question now becomes whether nondual awareness has a genuine epistemic dimension to it, whether it brings us “closer to reality” in the sense that there are nondual facts that it represents more accurately than the more ordinary form of consciousness does. In the following chapter, I will call this the possibility of a “convergence mode.” As explained previously, our everyday, perspectival form of experience is grounded in a single physical embodiment and a single behavioral space, necessarily resulting in a centered and bounded model of reality. It is a biological phenomenon. The inner image of an actively knowing self sporadically pops up in this space, driven, like the rest, mostly by evolutionary imperatives. By contrast, the scientific method attempts to abstract away from all merely subjective perspectives as far as methodologically possible. My final point is that nondual awareness seems to achieve something very similar in the context of individual, brain-bound models of reality, but in an entirely nonconceptual way. Perhaps all facts are ultimately nondual facts, and nondual awareness is the previously unnoticed point of convergence between human phenomenology and the scientific image of reality?

This is an intriguing possibility, but knowledge claims made in the public sphere always need independent justification. To publicly claim that nondual awareness is epistemically self-justifying would quite simply mean committing the E-fallacy (chapter 7). On the other hand, it would be intellectually dishonest to ignore the fact that the phenomenological profiles of some MPE experiences clearly possess a salient nondual aspect plus a quality of self-validation. An anonymous reviewer of my work has remarked that such experiences have a “noetic purport to be metaphysically ultimate.”<sup>21</sup> Of course, a lot of what I said about the E-fallacy, the phenomenology of certainty, and the signature of knowing in chapters 7 and 18 directly applies here. But a somewhat deeper aspect of the problem is that many of the relevant philosophical traditions have offered very different conceptual, epistemological, metaphysical, and soteriological interpretations of phenomenological reports from the one presented here, in particular via scholar–practitioners who extensively cultivated such experiences themselves. We need more research on this.

The philosophical difficulty lies in correctly assessing the accompanying phenomenology of certainty and insight with respect to the states’ own metaphysical status, especially when they involve more permanent alterations to conscious experience or when the report itself even states that this is *not* an experience (see chapter 31). Is their “noetic purport to be metaphysically ultimate” mere phenomenology, just an

interesting form of experiential character, or is it actually a deep, nonconceptual form of knowledge, perhaps one that has never been adequately described? Is it not phenomenal, but noumenal? Could it be *both*? I will not answer these questions here (though see chapter 31); but whoever wants to make the phenomenology of consciousness itself a target of serious future research will need to find a middle way that avoids feigning ignorance, jumping to unwarranted metaphysical conclusions, and proliferating new versions of the E-fallacy, all at the same time.

In closing, it may perhaps be inspiring to look at a classical perspective—one that is not merely theoretical but is also meant as practical guidance for serious meditators. In the quote from Wangchuk Dorje (1556–1603) that I have selected, the nondual state is characterized as an epistemic state, whereas states still structured by a subject/object duality are merely phenomenal states. According to this canonical description, nondual states constitute the manifestation of an insight (“realization”), whereas states of the subject/object type are mere experiences:

[. . .] if experiences are experienced in a dualistic way as objects of a subject, it is experience. If they do not arise as objects, it is realization. If they are experienced by the mind, it is experience. If the mind itself appears as their essence, it is realization. If they are experienced in the form of references, it is experience. If there is an understanding of the particulars of the reference, knowing directly their characteristics, it is realization. If the mind exists as a meditator and the meditation on bliss, clarity, nonconceptuality and emptiness exists as an object of meditation or experience, it is experience. If the meditator and the meditation are directly realized as inseparable, without it being just a fabricated, intellectual understanding, it is realization.<sup>22</sup>



This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/15196.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/15196.001.0001)

# The Elephant and the Blind

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

By: Thomas Metzinger

## Citation:

*The Elephant and the Blind: The Experience of Pure Consciousness: Philosophy,  
Science, and 500+ Experiential Reports*

By: Thomas Metzinger

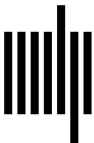
DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/15196.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262377287

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2024

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding  
and support from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

© 2024 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This work is subject to a Creative Commons CC-BY-ND-NC license.

This license applies only to the work in full and not to any components included with permission. Subject to such license, all rights are reserved. No part of this book may be used to train artificial intelligence systems without permission in writing from the MIT Press.



The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Stone Serif and Stone Sans by Westchester Publishing Services.

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Metzinger, Thomas, 1958– author.

Title: The elephant and the blind : the experience of pure consciousness: philosophy, science, and 500+ experiential reports / Thomas Metzinger.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2024] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023012135 (print) | LCCN 2023012136 (ebook) | ISBN 9780262547109 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262377294 (epub) | ISBN 9780262377287 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Consciousness.

Classification: LCC BF311 .M4725 2024 (print) | LCC BF311 (ebook) | DDC 153—dc23/eng/20230830

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023012135>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023012136>