

28 Transparency, Translucency, and Virtuality

All experience made of ME. Franziska is in ME—I am not in Franziska [#88]

I am not in the world—the world is in me! I am the space
in which everything appears. [#2299]

It was as if suddenly everything was clear. The realization that
“I am in everything and everything is in me.” [#3478]

This is a special chapter. I want to draw your attention to three particularly interesting phenomenological aspects, and therefore I offer more extensive commentary than usual, in addition to our selection of experiential reports. In chapter 27, on nondual awareness, I said that ordinary consciousness is a nonconceptual mode of knowing one’s own inner model of reality. However, any time that this way of knowing is contracted into an ego and falsely experienced as direct and immediate, a large part of the model appears as an *outer* reality to us. We then have what the Finnish philosopher Antti Revonsuo has called a built-in “out-of-brain experience”;¹ we experience ourselves as an embodied agent situated in some external environment. This makes good evolutionary sense: Our biological ancestors successfully learned to use different parts of their inner model as a proxy for parts of their environment. According to our ancestors’ subjective experience, models of trees turned into trees and models of wolves into real wolves. Their brains also learned to use the model of the body that carried them, including sensations like hunger, thirst, breath, and heartbeat, as a proxy for the body itself, improving the organism’s capacity for self-control. This is what it means to have a “transparent self-model”—that is, a conscious model of yourself as a whole that has become so reliable that you are unable to experience it *as* a model—and we will learn more about all this in the second half of this chapter. To stay alive, there was

a boundary that had to be protected, or re-created from moment to moment. Conscious experience often includes an explicit representation of inside and outside (e.g., of the interior parts of my body, of inner feelings and emotions arising from them, and also of what appears as my “own” mind)—plus an outside world of mind-independent objects. What meditation practice shows is that awareness can also occur with *no* explicit representation of inside and outside. This can lead to a conscious model of reality in which, according to verbal description, everything is inside and outside at the same time—or in which it has *neither* quality.

We are now beginning to expand our understanding of what the phenomenological concept of “nonduality” means. One of the most fascinating aspects is that some experiences of nondual awareness given by our participants quite directly match our best current models of what consciousness might really be from a neuroscientific, computational, or mathematical perspective, while at the same time cleanly mapping onto phenomenological descriptions given by scholar–practitioners more than 1,000 years ago. This may well be one of the most philosophically important results of our first interdisciplinary study. It is interesting to see how one can apply the idea of nonduality not only to the distinctions between subject and object and between inside and outside, but even to the distinction between what is “real” and what “does not exist.”

Before we get into a little bit of theory and return to the idea of an empty, unobstructed model of epistemic space (as introduced in chapters 4 and 5), let us carefully look at a series of experiential reports. Investigating this category of minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) experiences, it will become much clearer what it really means to say that consciousness itself models an unstructured space of knowledge, creating a global but maximally simple way of knowing one’s own internal model. This mode of knowing is characterized by the fact that sometimes even the deepest and most fundamental predictions and anticipations governing its contents can be temporarily suspended. Perhaps most interestingly, consciously experienced objects that appear within this space can take on a phenomenal quality of *virtuality*, or “as-if-ness.” If you will, they now appear as existing and not existing at the same time, or, perhaps better, as *neither* existing *nor* not existing—and in a way that is intellectually hard to grasp for beings like us. But the experience of ontological neither-nor-ness itself is quite explicit. From now on, I will call it the “phenomenology of virtuality.”

Do you still remember our fable of the elephant and the blind? One aspect of virtuality seems to be that, phenomenologically, objects are sometimes clearly “less” real than the centerless space of awareness itself, more like objects perceived during a lucid dream. You may recall a passage from chapter 19, where one committed practitioner

said, “You can often wonder when you’re having an experience in activity if it’s real or if you are only imagining it.”² Another aspect is the combination of absence and presence. Let us begin with an excellent phenomenological description of both—a description that was already presented in chapter 17, “Emptiness and Fullness”:

1788 [. . .] It is an emptiness that does not mean the absence of something, it is not a lack of something, but it is really elementary, very real and clear, extremely alive, and the objects chair, table, etc. still seem like chair and table, but not as real, as if they were only dream objects. They recede into the background as meaningless and a very present emptiness comes into the foreground, but it is more than the space between the objects. The living emptiness then permeates everything, concepts like here and now no longer exist. [. . .]

The experiential quality of virtuality goes beyond “illusoriness” or the phenomenal experience of “realness.” The contents of experience are now experienced as *phenomenal* in the sense of being insubstantial, lacking inherent existence, being a representation of something that is only possible, something that perhaps possesses *likelihood*—but that is not real. Suddenly, they seem to appear *as* appearances, as if they were parts of a virtual reality (VR), not really referring to anything but also not exactly mere hallucinations—rather, as if they are suspended in and permeated by the clarity of a larger, timeless space. The quality of epistemic openness described in chapters 4 and 9 has become vivid. There is a quality of de-immersion, as if the whole Ego Tunnel were now floating in this space of epistemic openness:

1703 [. . .] 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. [. . .]

3305 [. . .] Perception was crystal clear, the surroundings shimmered and I became aware of the actual timelessness in the world.

There is no quality of dissociation in these states. The phenomenal quality of pure awareness remains intimately connected; everything is contained within it and arises out of it:

2574 In pure awareness I experience awareness itself unseparated from all emerging or disappearing experiences in mind or body. Awareness without end—clear and wide and at the same time everything in it, out of it. By “everything” I mean the completely normal perception of things, thoughts, feelings . . . [. . .]

Some of our meditators describe MPE or pure awareness as a timeless and nonphysical space within which the phenomenal world of mere appearance is embedded. This space may be characterized by an all-permeating, deep, and luminous silence:

1151 It was an experience without self-reference, with open eyes, in which it was completely obvious that everything in existence is pure appearance, “unborn,” and that in fact and truth nothing has ever stirred out of deepest silence.

1381 [. . .] Into a space of timeless self-luminous world-penetrating silence. [. . .] The silence is not acoustic, the space not physical. [. . .] The whole world was completely just logical and clear, embedded in this bright fragrant sweet silence.

This kind of silent spatiality can lead to a global state that is characterized by a strong sense of lightness, beauty, and purity, and in which the phenomenal character of awareness itself even gains a “hyperreal” quality. The distinct phenomenology of MPE is somehow “more real” than that of an ordinary wake state. Paradoxically, however, the concrete experiential contents appearing within such global states now acquire a “dreamlike” and “ephemeral” quality:

3464 [. . .] At the same time the state appears as the most natural thing in the world, like a kind of basic state of mind. And, crazily enough, as the only real thing in the world. [. . .]

2844 [. . .] The moment was unusually pure, light, free of self, wide, peaceful, good. All senses were available, alive, I was fully aware of the sensory experiences, but the experience felt unbelievably, inconceivably light, ephemeral, dreamlike, and beautiful. What touched me most was the purity of the experience—there was a feeling as if this were truer or more real than normal, confused experience. Since then I have been accompanied by the certainty that awakening is possible.

This “dreamlike” or “ephemeral” quality is what I have termed the phenomenology of virtuality. It means that things are experienced as *neither* real *nor* illusory. There is a context of lightness and beauty, plus a whole range of qualities that we know well from earlier chapters, like soundness, holism, weightlessness, unboundedness, and gratitude. In the following report, the distinct phenomenal character of “virtual” perceptual objects is described in terms of “holographic constructs”:

1629 [. . .] The bare trees creaked loudly overhead, as if the wind was going to take them down. I sat on a log in the forest to meditate briefly when suddenly and spontaneously everything “clicked” and made intuitive sense, not in any way that could be accurately verbalized, but as though everything was [what] it was supposed to be in utter perfection. Looking back at the experience now, it seemed as if everything merged into an undifferentiated whole while simultaneously maintaining the appearance of individuation (e.g., there was still

a perception of “trees,” colors, the coolness of the air, but not in the least bit as contrasts such as “ground” versus “sky” (as if they were fundamentally different), grey versus brown, warmth versus cool. Everything appeared different but was in actuality the very same. There was a quality of weightlessness, buoyancy, unboundedness, as though this body was an arbitrary mass but “leaking” and “mixing” everywhere. The whole world was mixing, completely fluid, whole but only (again) appearing (as if illusory) as separate objects. A deep sense of peace and gratitude pervaded. There was no “self,” only the appearance of one in order to tie the experience together into a coherent whole. There was also an equanimous joy—not coarse/rugged, but a subtle yet pervasive equanimity with positive intonations. [. . .] walking through the forest, feeling as though there was no separation between “me” and “it” (forest, other “objects” supposedly “outside” of “me,” which felt like holographic constructs intended for convenience only), still with this buoyant/weightless quality (bodily boundaries dissolved) and with every step rooted in peace, equanimity, joy, wholeness. [. . .] Everything felt fresh and alive, all embracing. [. . .] Everything felt silent, crisp, beautiful.

In an attempt to explain the difficult Tibetan concept of *rang snang*, the English Dzogchen teacher and translator Keith Dowman arrives at a very similar phenomenological description. He says that it is best understood “by identifying with the all-pervading cognitive principle (*rigpa*) and then conceiving one’s own body and the environment as a holistic gestalt, or hologram, projected within it.”³ This is the global phenomenology of “virtuality” that I am drawing your attention to. It may turn out to be of central importance for philosophy of mind, for example because it points to a certain type of computational model. MPE could be a model of an epistemic space in which phenomenal reality appears. In the words of one of our meditators: “[. . .] it’s an all knowing, un-centered space that without doubt is behind every phenomenon that is ever experienced” (#1229).

A close technological relative of VR is *augmented reality* (AR). In AR setups, users can see and interact with tools or other objects as if floating right in front of them, even while they remain invisible to other people. The objects being moved around or used appear seamlessly superimposed on what the users normally take to be reality itself. Of course, what they typically take to be “reality” is itself only the conscious VR created by their brains, as I have explained in depth in my previous books *The Ego Tunnel* and *Being No One*. The phenomenological metaphor of “holographic constructs intended for convenience only” is brilliant because it may give us a deeper understanding of what consciousness really is: the organism’s own pragmatic AR. But *what* exactly

is being augmented? It seems as if pure awareness itself, the primordial model of an empty epistemic space, is what is augmented during ordinary conscious experience whenever we move through our life-world in ordinary wake states. The “holographic constructs intended for convenience only” are what help a biological organism survive, successfully navigate through the physical world, and eventually copy its genes to the next generation. But all the constructed contents of experience are embedded into a timeless quality of epistemic openness.

As we have seen, in MPE modes, experiential contents are often described as “floating” or “suspended” in an unbounded, open space of timeless awareness. Sometimes this quality of looking out from timelessness can lead to a concrete conscious perspective *sub specie aeternitatis*. Just like the Greek *ataraxia* (chapter 14), the German *Seelengrund* (chapter 26), or the English “transparency” (to be explored in this chapter), this Latin concept is another example of many concepts originating in Western philosophy that are helpful in understanding certain MPE phenomenologies. You may know that the philosopher Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677) coined the term *sub specie aeternitatis* in his famous *Ethics*,⁴ referring to an abstract view of the world “under the aspect of eternity” or “from the perspective of the eternal.” But did you also know that Spinoza thought that precisely this way of viewing the world was how the true philosopher does it? In our data, we find phenomenal correlates of Spinoza’s philosophical worldview:

1828 [. . .] The ego boundaries, which are primarily physically felt, expand into infinite vastness, and all experiential contents rise in pure awareness like a bubble in champagne, or they almost hang in the air like a bird in free flight in the sky. In an even deeper level of the same experience it is possible to dissolve the last remaining latent experiential backgrounds of space and time, so that the subjective impression is created of simultaneously surveying all times, places, and worlds from a perspective of vastness. [. . .]

The category of strong nondual states on which we are currently focusing is related to the phenomenology of “witness consciousness” investigated in chapter 19. Here too, the witness can be experienced as something eternal, an impersonal and timeless ideal observer, an awareness that functions as the “three-dimensional screen” in which everything else arises and disappears (compare with #2916). The space of awareness itself is vast and unbounded, but it contains the phenomenal self at the center of its phenomenal world. The boundaries of this virtual world are indeterminate; it seems to be floating, and sometimes its contents are only a tiny fraction of the totality of conscious experience:

2807 I experienced myself as a collection of sensations and behavior patterns that, while normally occupying 100% of my awareness, suddenly were about 0.000000000000001% of my conscious experience. All these arisings of personality, fear, liking, protecting, thoughts, ideas, were just popping into being in a vast, vast, warm, infinite space of awareness. It had an absolutely hilarious quality to it also—the way I’d try to describe it is the realization that I’d spent all this time running around inside a tiny, compelling kaleidoscope looking for a doorway out, when in reality the kaleidoscope has no floor or ceiling.

Normal phenomenal reality is just a thin layer of experience superimposed onto the surface of something vast, something unbounded and unstructured:

2355 [. . .] I bathe completely dissolved in myself and know about all this. Normal reality feels like a thin sheet of paper on this ocean of Pure Awareness. [. . .]

In the experiential reports related to the family of phenomenal states that I am drawing attention to here, MPE is experienced in part as the representational space in which phenomenal reality appears or could potentially appear. Here is one example in which a meditator has had a clear experience of this contentless space itself, but *as* a representation in which the contents of perceptual experience could potentially appear:

87 Experiencing infinite space. Although the space was dark, its expansion was clearly three-dimensional, but at the same time I was aware that this space was a mental representation of my mind. If I lived in a two-dimensional world, I might have seen a two-dimensional space. For me this space was kind of like an object of my consciousness, in which the objects of my sensory perception are themselves placed. In this particular experience, however, only space as an object of consciousness was present. [. . .]

The first-person perspective, the epistemic sense of a self *to which* this reality appears, is just one part of the experience. It is a contingent and dispensable structural phenomenological feature:

3458 Awareness as a field or space in which reality appears. This reality also contains the impression that there is someone to whom this reality appears. A notion arises that this is only ONE way for reality to be experienced. The perception of one’s own “selfhood” as a small phenomenon in the field of awareness.

The meditator gradually discovers that the “knowing self” is just another fictitious entity that the brain uses to explain what is happening to itself by constructing the

epistemic agent model introduced in chapter 25. She may now even begin to identify with the process as a whole (medium plus content), as in the following reports:

3289 I started perceiving my room as some sort of transparent sphere or bubble.

Objects inside it, as well as my sense of self. Instead of being independent in some way, [I] become part of the totality of it.

2804 [. . .] Then stillness. [. . .] The feeling that everything in the room is without borders; if someone in the room makes a noise, it's like the noise is coming from in me, not from them. But I am not in a fixed state but more so of air, or something very spacious. I am me and still I am everybody around me, every noise. Everything flows through me. [. . .]

This is what in chapter 3 I called the “zero-person perspective” (OPP). The word “perspective” comes from the Latin *perspicere*, originally meaning “to see through.” Having a perspective normally means having a form through which we experience the world, where the form itself is transparent and therefore usually invisible. Here, however, awareness of the old first-person perspective (1PP) is part of the experience because we look not *through* it, but *at* it. The conscious organism envelops it or views it from the infinity of all possible perspectives, suddenly realizing its constructed, virtual nature. If you will, the 1PP is now a part of the OPP. Interestingly, the VR appearing in the space of nondual awareness can even be a *social* reality (a 1P[plural]P, as when we refer to ourselves together with others) because it sometimes contains multiple subjective perspectives that can be directed at each other:

3048 [. . .] It was as if we were parts of an image that could see each other. [. . .]

I hope that the reports presented here have served as a good illustration of the basics of what I have termed the “phenomenology of virtuality.” Some of them also point to another important aspect of what makes the phenomenology of Rilke’s *Weltinnenraum* (coming up in the next section) so interesting: the varying degree of “transparency.” Our inner model of the space of pure awareness is a medium, like a window. You can look *at* a window, or *through* a window. And as we all know, sometimes you can somehow do both at the same time:

2576 [. . .] as if the sensations were becoming lighter and lighter and the senses were expanding into the room. The bodily sensations are as light as all other sensations (auditory and visual) and therefore a more spatial, expansive quality was perceived in which the body is no longer at the center. It would be as if the “observer” was no longer in my body, but everywhere in my perception. This was accompanied by a way of all experiences being “embedded” in a larger

space that is not accessible to us, since it is unconscious (otherwise it would be an experience). It was as if one could look “through” all experience, one could see the projections of the mind and feel the projection surface behind it, which simply “is.” Untouched. Another description might be that the three-dimensional space and its experiences are reduced to a two-dimensional plane of experience. Just as the images on the eyes can be recognized as such and the edge of our field of vision represents the transition of experience to the container of experience. [. . .]

Just like a window, our inner model of the space of pure awareness and epistemic openness (which may be what MPE is) can be more or less transparent. If it is fully transparent, we typically do not notice it. We see *through* it, but it reappears as the experiential realness of what we take to be the external world. It reappears as the all-pervading subjective confidence that *things are there and we know about them*. It reappears as *the certainty that something has been known*, the nonconceptual knowledge that knowledge exists. It reappears as the background experience of *openness to the world*. Only through meditation practice do we sometimes become aware of the window itself, quite often while still looking through it at the same time. Then we begin to notice something that has been there all along. Here are three short examples:

3159 [. . .] It is as if in everyday life I see the world almost literally through invisible glasses. Which are so well cleaned that I don’t even notice them.

2295 [. . .] As if the border between my face and the world is transparent. [. . .]

3464 [. . .] The extreme lightness of the state; awareness seems like a breath, barely noticeable, so that I could easily overlook it. [. . .]

Meditation practice now starts to seem like a sustained attempt to finally stop overlooking something that has been there all along. Let me close this section by drawing attention to one last phenomenological aspect, perhaps the most important of all. Apparently, our model of epistemic openness itself—the silent, nondual, timeless space of wakeful awareness—can sometimes function as the new unit of identification (chapters 24 and 29). The model of this space can function as if it were the new body (an abstract “space-of-awareness body”), as if it were taking on part of the role of what in the past we called our “self”:

1746 For a few moments I vanished but was instead a void perceiving reality as a bright picture.

2898 It can hardly be described in words. I had the feeling of perceiving EVERYTHING and at the same time being able to consciously perceive only a

millionth part. I myself was awareness; at the same time I was embedded in it, carried, protected, absolutely safe. On the one hand everything was within me, on the other hand I was in everything, unseparated. I simply was.

2299 [. . .] I am not in the world—the world is in me! I am the space in which everything appears. [. . .]

Diaphanousness, Indeterminacy, and *Weltinnenraum*

And in general, that which makes the sensation of blue a mental fact seems to escape us; it seems, if I may use a metaphor, to be transparent—we look through it and see nothing but the blue; we may be convinced that there is something, but what it is no philosopher,

I think, has yet clearly recognised.

[. . .] the moment we try to fix our attention upon consciousness and to see what, distinctly, it is, it seems to vanish: it seems as if we had before us a mere emptiness. When we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue: the other element is as if it were diaphanous. Yet it can be distinguished if we look attentively enough, and if we know that there is something to look for.

—George Edward Moore (1873–1958), *The Refutation of Idealism*

In this section, I want to draw your attention to two philosophical concepts, one old and one new. I think that they might help us describe some aspects of advanced contemplative phenomenology more accurately. The first of the two is the “diaphanousness” or “transparency” of consciousness. The term was introduced into the context of Western academic philosophy more than a century ago by the British philosopher G. E. Moore, a professor at Cambridge University and one of the founders of analytic philosophy. His successor to the chair for philosophy of mind and logic at Cambridge was the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the Nobel laureate Bertrand Russell, when he was a young man, said this about Moore: “I almost worship him as if he were a god. I have never felt such an extravagant admiration for anybody.”

Let me first explain what “phenomenal transparency” means. This philosophical concept has a lot to do with what, in meditation research, is often called “reification.” Phenomenology is described as transparent when certain contents of experience (e.g., perceptual objects, the body, and sometimes even the content of thought) are experienced as thinglike, mind-independent, ultimately real, and immediately given. We don’t see that they are processes anymore because, phenomenologically, they have become frozen or “solidified” into something objective and real. You experience the tree in front of you not as a holographic construct, but simply as a tree, out in front of you, irrevocably real and as if immediately given. This is because normally,

your introspective attention does not penetrate the earlier processing stages in your brain that construct the visual scene, bind different visual features into a gestalt, resolve ambiguities, and separate the tree from its background.

Here is another example. If you try to meditate but get carried away into a manifest daydream, then you are not aware of your thoughts *as* thoughts anymore; you have forgotten that you are daydreaming—and even that you were intending to meditate. This is true even if you actually initiated the mind-wandering episode yourself, perhaps because you simply got too bored.⁵ First, you just played around with some mental images—maybe you recalled some pleasant memories and began to revel in a slightly self-aggrandizing future scenario—and then “you” got lost in the process. The epistemic agent model collapsed, and thoughts became realities. This is exactly what it means to say that the daydream becomes “manifest”: You are now unaware that all this is only a representation, a dynamic inner construct. Your body sits on the cushion, but your mind is far gone, fully immersed in the melodrama of the narrative self.

In my book *Being No One*, I said that transparency is a special form of darkness. There is something that you cannot see—namely, the fact that most of the content of your experience are constructs, the brain’s best guesses, representations not experienced *as* representations. They are probability distributions, predictions, mere possibilities—but represented as realities. In *Being No One*, I then applied the notion of transparency to the conscious self-model, the inner image that an organism’s brain sometimes creates of the organism as a whole. If the self-model is transparent, the organism *identifies* with it by, as it were, “confusing itself” with its own inner image of itself. The image becomes the unit of identification (see chapters 24 and 29 for more on this idea). Now the self-model is not experienced as a holographic construct but is fully reified: phenomenologically, the model has turned into a real self. Functionally, the organism is now attached to its content, driven forward and enslaved by whatever happens in the self-model. *You* have come into existence.

Let us now take a quick look at what Moore really said.⁶ He thought that there is one maximally general phenomenal property shared by all sensory qualities—namely, awareness itself, the phenomenal quality of knowing per se. Remarkably, Moore actually used the term “emptiness” to describe this property. As can be seen in the short quotes provided in this chapter, this quality of “mere emptiness” is normally transparent or “diaphanous” because it is not explicitly experienced—but, as Moore correctly insists, it *can* be experienced. For us, this is a highly relevant point. Moore goes on to identify another phenomenological property, that of *evasiveness*. Some aspects of experience “seem to vanish” as a result of exercising attentional agency, actively trying to “fix our attention” onto them. Nondual awareness is highly evasive because any sense

of exerting mental effort to attend to it or any attempt to meditate on it immediately destroys it by creating an epistemic agent model (chapter 25) and contracting the phenomenal signature of knowing into this model (chapters 4, 8, and 18).

Most interestingly, this famous analytic philosopher from Cambridge also claimed that this property of consciousness itself can become phenomenally opaque—it can *lose* its transparency—if two conditions are met: (1) we look “attentively enough” and (2) we “know” that there is a possible object for introspective attention.⁷ This sounds as if some high-level expectation or belief (which might perhaps even be unconscious) needs to be in place: a belief that there actually *is* a target for attention that we can detect, fixate, and home in on. Moore himself thought that this was really difficult: He found no record of any philosopher who was “able to hold *it* [consciousness] and *blue* before their minds and to compare them, in the same way in which they can compare *blue* and *green*.”⁸ We can now explain why this *had* to be the case. Any attempt to “hold” MPE plus any other conscious content “before our minds and to compare them” necessarily creates an epistemic agent model. *You* can never be “dead on target,” because *you* are the occluder.

Moore probably knew nothing of Dzogchen or Mahāmudra philosophy, but he clearly thought that awareness is relational and that consciousness is a second-order process of knowing—because, quite simply, having a sensation is being aware of something, and consciousness is the knowledge that this awareness currently exists. In his own words:

The true analysis of a sensation or idea is as follows. The element that is common to them all, and which I have called “consciousness,” really *is* consciousness. A sensation is, in reality, a case of “knowing” or “being aware of” or “experiencing” something. When we know that the sensation of blue exists, the fact we know is that there exists an awareness of blue.⁹

Consciousness then becomes meta-awareness. Being conscious is being aware of awareness itself, just as one can be aware of a specific sensation. Importantly, “awareness of” is the same (epistemic but nonconceptual) relation of knowing something in sensation as it also is in becoming aware of this very awareness itself. In Moore’s words: “To be aware of the sensation of blue [. . .] is to be aware of an awareness of blue.”¹⁰

In the context of meditative experience, we can now interpret Moore as saying that an aperspectival and nonagentive form of meta-awareness always exists in all forms of conscious perceptual knowledge. Of course, this meta-awareness has nothing to do with words, concepts, or the thinking of thoughts; it is, as today’s psychologists and philosophers of cognitive science would say, a “nonpropositional” form of meta-awareness.¹¹ A related point made by Moore, which strongly resembles what

humankind's contemplative traditions have often said about pure awareness, is that this second-order relation ("awareness-of" the current existence of another "awareness-of,"—namely, of some specific perceptual quality or sensation) is mostly transparent. This means that it often goes unnoticed *as such*, but we should actually be able to make it phenomenally opaque by attending to it in the right way. It is amazing to see how at the very beginning of analytical philosophy, following in the footsteps of the German philosopher Gottlob Frege, this British thinker very clearly expressed insights that Asian philosophers and scholar-practitioners had had at least 1,500 years earlier.

Moore's successor, Wittgenstein (in §275 of his *Philosophical Investigations*), put the point about transparency differently. He said that when we look at the blue of the sky and say to ourselves, "How blue the sky is!" we never have the feeling of pointing-into-ourselves and also never think that really we ought not to point to the color with our hand, but instead ought to point with our attention. Wittgenstein then asked an interesting question: What exactly does it mean "to point to something with one's attention"? Of course, the question also arises as to who or what does the pointing. Could there be a way of gently guiding attention not to the blueness of the sky but to the awareness of the blue, without contracting it into an epistemic agent model, into a knowing self? Actively searching for the experiential quality of awareness itself necessarily creates an epistemic agent model and the well-known duality of subject and object—but in real life, it may be possible to "ignite" a recurrent process of awareness reflexively knowing itself, and then to open up and let go completely. Meditation may have a lot to do with learning how to repeatedly point attention to awareness itself, and then simultaneously let both attention and awareness go—like the string of a trompo, a spinning top.

I would like to ask some slightly provocative questions. Could there be something like MPE blindness? Are we normally not seeing something that has always been there—the window itself? Perhaps we just need to take two steps back, making the window frame become part of the overall picture again and rediscovering the obvious. As I said in chapter 23, you can experience a picture *as* a picture only if you are able to see its frame. What we call "meditation" might then simply mean finally beginning to notice MPE and gently de-contracting it, rather than constructing some fancy state of consciousness through years of practice. Is the first-person perspective that which *occludes* the zero-person perspective? Could it be that the manifest image of our whole experiential world is more like a blindfold pulled over the zero-person perspective, a virtual veil covering pure awareness?

Before we proceed to the phenomenology of virtuality, expanding our toolkit yet another time, let us ask whether all this could lead to a deeper understanding of what conscious experience *as such* really is, this time on a conceptual level. A common motif

in many self-reports is that after having fully identified with the space of awareness, all experiential content appears *within* this space, within oneself (look back at the first three metaphorical descriptions at the beginning of this chapter). This aspect maps neatly onto phenomenological descriptions given by expert meditators and philosophical scholar-practitioners many centuries ago, as well as onto modern theories that describe the brain as constantly creating a “virtual model” of reality as a whole. I think the relevant difference between such MPE modes of experience and ordinary wake states consists precisely in whether someone has an additional model of the *space* of knowledge and experience (with which they could identify) or whether they are completely immersed in their own VR and completely identified with the virtual self-model created by the brain.

One of my main claims in this book has been that pure awareness is not literally contentless, but that it actually represents something. It is *of* something, but in a way that makes it completely natural to describe it as devoid of content, as entirely empty, as not like anything, or even as a kind of nothingness. If pure awareness should turn out to be something that philosophers might call a “global nonconceptual representation” or neuroscientists might call a “predictive, generative model,” then in some sense it is an embodied image occurring in a biological organism. You can see an image in two different ways: You can recognize it as an image, or you can look right through it, as it were, and mistake it for a direct experience of reality itself. Drawing on Moore, we can now say that in the first case, the image would be called “opaque,” and in the second case, it would be “transparent.” This is merely a visual metaphor. But if it’s pointing in the right direction, then pure awareness *itself* also could be sometimes opaque and sometimes transparent: Sometimes we might be able to look at it, and sometimes we might be looking through it. And sometimes we *are* it.

We now have interesting computational models that help us understand not only what opacity and transparency are, but also the fact that opacity is something that can be *controlled*. For mindfulness meditation, you need to be able to “see” your own attentional processes in the first place—if they are fully transparent, you can neither recognize nor control them. Contemplative neuroscientists and theoreticians are now beginning to view attentional processes and meta-awareness as the mechanisms of opacity control at different hierarchical levels. They call the underlying process “deep active inference.” I like an analogy that Lars Sandved-Smith and his colleagues have suggested, the idea of the scrolling wheel on a pair of binoculars:

Some mental processes function only to make aspects of the world perceivable. We are not aware of them “as such,” but rather, we are aware of the content that they make available: these cognitive processes are “transparent,” like a glass window that

allows us to see what is outside. Other processes, however, make these cognitive constructive processes accessible per se. This second set of processes are about other states of the mind, to which they provide access, as a new source of data now made available for further processing. These processes are akin to the scroll wheel on a pair of binoculars, which has a position state that its user can control and which enables one to apprehend and to control the precision of sensory inputs.¹²

Conscious experience is a medium. It is a medium through which we can know the world and ourselves. It creates epistemic openness. Whenever the medium is “transparent,” we are unaware of it and perceive just the world and ourselves in it, in a seemingly direct and immediate way. Philosophers would call this “the phenomenology of naive realism.” “Naive realism” is not a derogatory term. In the philosophy of perception, it simply refers to the idea that the senses provide us with direct awareness of objects as they really are. The idea is also called “direct realism,” “perceptual realism,” and “common-sense realism”—and Antti Revonsuo’s concept of an “out-of-brain experience” from the very beginning of this chapter is a good illustration of it. Again, this isn’t necessarily something negative, because we can also view it as a triumph of biological evolution: The transparent VR in our heads has been highly parsimonious and computationally efficient in helping us survive and copy our genes to every next generation. However, meditation practice can make the medium “opaque,” so we sometimes become aware of the medium while still perceiving the world. And in a full-absorption episode, we have nothing but the autonomous recurrent activity of the medium itself, creating an internal model of mere epistemic capacity, of the abstract space of awareness as such. Epistemic openness is all there is.

More often, however, meditators may gradually become aware of the “invisible pair of glasses” while still looking at the world. As they begin to turn the scroll wheel on their binoculars, an air of pure awareness starts to appear, like a translucent mist of mindfulness, and its ethereal clarity makes it easy to overlook. As one report that has appeared elsewhere in this book put it:

3464 Typical for me is the extreme lightness of the state; awareness seems like a breath, barely noticeable, so that I could easily overlook it.

As explained in chapters 4 and 5, my own working hypothesis is that consciousness is our inner model of an “epistemic space,” a space in which possible and actual states of knowledge can be represented. I think that conscious beings are precisely those who have a model of their own space of knowledge—they are systems that (in an entirely nonlinguistic and nonconceptual way) *know that they currently have the capacity to know something*. Conscious systems have an inner image of this very capacity, this

open epistemic space (elsewhere, I have called consciousness a “self-modeling epistemic space”).¹³ The space itself can be almost empty, containing only a clear, abstract image of the mere capacity for knowledge and experience. Or it can contain images of actually ongoing actions, perceptions, feelings, and thoughts. In this account, MPE itself is a model of the entirely unobstructed empty space in which all those different processes of knowing something can occur.

But now there is a new picture emerging. Full-absorption episodes, in which there is just pure awareness and nothing else, are stand-alone models of our epistemic space as such, of our capacity to know. They implicitly contain the myriad possibilities of what *could* in principle be known. Nondual awareness, on the other hand, is a state in which the model is there and has become salient, and in which something actually *is* known—but the structural feature of subject/object duality (by means of which the embodied brain normally explains what is happening to itself) has been attenuated. Now the experience of knowing is no longer contracted into an ego, into an epistemic agent model—now “everything knows,” but selflessly.

Here is the idea. In normal waking consciousness, our brain represents the statistical property of subjective confidence (which we discussed in chapter 5 as the estimated accuracy of perception and the congruence with prior expectations), either in a transparent or in an opaque way. Transparency creates realness; opacity creates knowingness. We must also imagine the whole process as something that is embodied and alive, fluid and context sensitive—the selfless dance of a dynamically nested hierarchy. If our models are very good, inferential uncertainty is low and our high degree of subjective confidence appears as “realness”: The low-level models’ content is portrayed as mind-independent, immediately given, and irrevocably real to us—it *appears*. Here, consciousness is a transparent inner image of subjective confidence. At other times, when inferential certainty is fluctuating (because the validity of our beliefs is not fully established), our representation of confidence turns into the feeling of knowing, which is then contracted into a knowing self (chapters 8 and 25). Within the epistemic agent model, subjective confidence is *in* the mind (but not independent of it); it is something that the self tries to construct (not something immediately given), and there is always the possibility that it is referring to something that will turn out not to be real. Accordingly, the feeling of knowing fluctuates.

But what is the *consciousness* of it all? One special and highly interesting case is provided by the background experience of alertness itself (see chapter 4 for details). Tonic alertness fluctuates only on the order of minutes or hours; therefore—if we had a model of it, and *if* we were aware of it—the degree of subjective confidence should be very high. The general phenomenological prediction is that wakefulness should come with

a robust quality of knowingness, of certitude. If we *had* a stable background-model of our own alertness, of the fact that this organism is now open to the world (as explained in chapter 4), then the associated inferential uncertainty should be very low. But there are two logical possibilities. If the alertness model were opaque, we would “see” it. There would be an explicit experience of emptiness and bare wakefulness, of epistemic openness *as such*. But what would happen if your inner model of epistemic openness were fully transparent? What is the phenomenological prediction? If the alertness model were transparent, the knowingness of bare wakeful awareness itself should be invisible, but the certitude would still be there. It would be transferred to the content. All you would see would be “the world”—that which can be known, the current content of your epistemic space—but as immediately given, perfectly real, and with high certitude. Meditation practice may have a lot to do with building and learning how to sustain a model of bare wakefulness, of epistemic openness itself, while actually keeping it visible—in order to *realize* wakefulness.¹⁴

Another specific phenomenological prediction results from this new philosophical picture. In advanced meditators, there sometimes should occur states in which subject/object structure is missing, while an image of the world as a whole has appeared that is no longer experienced as mind-independent but is also not experienced as being “in the mind only,” as a single conscious thought or mental image might be. Could there be nondual states in which everything appears as *virtual* (i.e., as going beyond the conceptual distinction between “existent” and “nonexistent”)? The content of consciousness would then be experienced as a single VR or as elements of a lucid dream happening in the wake state, enfolded or embedded into the centerless, all-encompassing space of pure awareness. If you will, the Ego Tunnel should actually be experienced as floating in this space.

Let us now turn to the phenomenology of virtuality.¹⁵ “Virtuality”—in a solely phenomenological sense—will be the second new concept offered in this chapter. *Virtuality* refers to the specific experiential quality that often appears when people experiment with VR, wearing VR goggles while moving through a computer-simulated environment. In a strange way, with this technology, things are experienced as *neither real nor illusory*, or as being real *and* illusory at the same time. As we have touched on before, a general principle applies to many of the paradoxical-sounding verbal reports presented in this book: They were written not by professors of logic but by human beings trying to find the right words for something that, just like the VR experience, played no role in the linguistic communities they grew up in.

Let us stay with the VR experience for a moment before returning to contemplative phenomenology. Intellectually, we know that all of this is generated in the computer,

and one part of us never believes in it at all. But on a bodily, gut level, we do believe: We feel fully situated; we're just *there*. This creates the phenomenology of virtuality: the experience of things being neither real nor unreal (and again, please note that, plausibly, some people might describe the very same experience as being both at once). Technically, we could perhaps say that the phenomenology of virtuality is the phenomenology of metaphysical indeterminacy because it involves consciously experiencing this very neither-nor-ness, but on an entirely nonconceptual level. Virtuality is the global phenomenal character that emerges when it is no longer the case that the person wearing VR goggles or the meditator experiences things as *either* existing *or* not. In an interesting way, the distinction itself has become meaningless. For example, while in a VR environment, you know that all of this is just a model, a computer-generated simulation, but you still automatically react to it "as if you really were there." Researchers in VR call this the "place illusion."¹⁶

Astonishingly, very few people seem to have realized that we have continual access to the richest, most robust, and closest-to-perfect VR experience currently imaginable: our very own ordinary biologically evolved form of waking consciousness. It creates a very robust place illusion (i.e., it involves a stable version of Revonsuo's "out-of-brain experience") plus a fantastically realistic experience of embodiment with the help of a transparent body model that cannot be experienced *as* a model. And as the icing on the cake, it adds a virtual ego—the epistemic agent model that we normally identify with. As is well known, the algorithms behind today's social media platforms try to maximize the user's *engagement* with a website (by creating outrage and a sense of urgency, by encouraging constant social comparison and aspiration without fulfillment, by inducing compulsive multitasking, by systematically draining attentional resources, and so on).¹⁷ It is interesting to note that evolution discovered all this a long time ago: A mostly transparent model of reality also creates *maximal engagement* because it enslaves the organism via the nervous system from which this model arises. It creates a new level of fascination with reality by entangling the organism in a mesh of "immediate" experiences of salience and valence, attaching it to an inbuilt existence bias, thereby forcing the animal to act out the biological imperatives encoded in the model.¹⁸ The creature becomes fascinated by its own life.

VR is the best technological metaphor for conscious experience that we currently have.¹⁹ On the other hand, the history of philosophy has clearly shown that technological metaphors for the human mind are fertile but problematic. Think of the mechanical clock, the camera, or, more recently, the computer as a physically realized abstract automaton.²⁰ All these metaphors have severe limitations, but if each of them captures at least one central aspect of the mind, then they should also give us an idea

of how to re-create it. Could a confluence of artificial intelligence (AI) and VR result in “synthetic phenomenology,” the technological creation of artificial consciousness?²¹ For many of the forms of conscious experience described in this book, it is hard to see how they could be noninvasively reconstructed in the human brain, at least using the technology currently available in VR labs around the world—but this is exactly what needs to be tried. Doing so would give us a better understanding of the neural mechanisms underlying them, and in the long run, it might even help improve the efficiency of contemplative practice itself.

I predict that a whole new stream of future research will take this direction, leading to a confluence of AI, VR, and neuroscience. Neurotechnology will always have practical limitations, but we will see a second wave in which the VR metaphor itself may point the way to a whole range of new research goals and phenomenological insights. Have you ever imagined that you were a visionary who could see into the future? Well, your ordinary conscious experience is an (often reasonably successful) attempt to do just that, because what you see is the most *likely* future state of the world. Scientifically, phenomenal content (the brain-based content of conscious experience) is the content of an ongoing simulation; it is a prediction trying to model the probable causes of a sensory signal. It is not a veridical representation of the actual environment, and it is useful for precisely this reason, because it helps the organism reduce the uncertainty about what will happen next. This is what conscious experience and VR have in common: They provide us with a counterfactual image of the world. Waking consciousness is a complex hallucination constrained by the senses, and—as sketched out earlier in this discussion—whenever the associated second-order confidence becomes transparent, it makes something possible become real. As opposed to today’s VR, biological consciousness is about successfully anticipating the future. This is the reason why we could even say that ordinary consciousness is an action-oriented kind of *visionary* experience.

Two decades ago, when comparing the phenomenology of dreaming to that of the waking state from a philosophical perspective, I described the wake state as a form of “online dreaming.”²² Conscious waking is a dreamlike state modulated by the constraints of ongoing sensory input:

[A] fruitful way of looking at the human brain, therefore, is as a system which, even in ordinary waking states, constantly hallucinates at the world, as a system that constantly lets its internal autonomous simulational dynamics collide with the ongoing flow of sensory input, vigorously dreaming at the world and thereby generating the content of phenomenal experience.²³

Today, it is striking to note that some of our best current theories of consciousness describe it as a “controlled online hallucination.”²⁴ These theories are beginning to say, in a much more precise way, what I was gesturing toward in the quote given here. Many of us doing consciousness research now view conscious experience as something based on *predictions* about current sensory input.²⁵ It is important to understand that relative to the actual state of the world, all predictive representations are nonveridical. They are not in real time, and they deal in probabilities only. From a strictly epistemological perspective, they are misrepresentations; they are only *as if*—but nevertheless, they are potentially beneficial for the biological system in which they occur.²⁶ The VR content generated by nonliving machines is typically part of an animated computer graphics model, and if taken as depicting the actual physical three-dimensional scene surrounding the user, it is also a misrepresentation, conjuring up an “as if” world. Again, they are both fit for purpose. VR content does not result from a design flaw—the whole point is to generate perceptual representations of *possible* worlds in the user’s brain. The actual world is beside the point. A new VR (created by a computer) becomes embedded in an old VR (created by a biological brain that has a long evolutionary history).²⁷

Elsewhere, I have argued that because of this, VR technology will function as a new cognitive niche to which the human mind will adapt:

What is historically new, and what creates not only novel psychological risks but also entirely new ethical and legal dimensions, is that *one* VR gets ever more deeply embedded into *another* VR: the conscious mind of human beings, which has evolved under very specific conditions and over millions of years, now gets causally coupled and informationally woven into technical systems for representing possible realities. Increasingly, it is not only culturally and socially embedded but also shaped by a technological niche that over time itself quickly acquires a rapid, autonomous dynamics and ever new properties. This creates a complex convolution, a nested form of information flow in which the biological mind and its technological niche influence each other in ways we are just beginning to understand. It is this complex convolution that makes it so important to think about the Ethics of VR in a critical, evidence-based, and rational manner.²⁸

At this point, we could leap off in any number of interesting directions. We could explore probability distributions; the minimization of prediction error; or how attention, perception, and what is sometimes called “embodied action” are all actually expressions of one and the same underlying principle. VR as a new cognitive niche also has a lot to do with the idea of *Bewusstseinskultur* (an applied ethics and practical “culture of consciousness,” to which I will return in the epilogue). But what is even more interesting is how the model of reality underlying nondual awareness and many of the

experiences reflected in the reports in this chapter converge with the scientific image of what could actually be happening.

The American philosopher Wilfrid Sellars (1912–1989) spoke of the clash between the “manifest image” of “man-in-the-world” and “the scientific image” of him. The manifest image is created by a realm of appearances—today, we could refer to this as the phenomenal model of reality currently active in our brains—but science ultimately reveals things as they are in themselves. Sellars was not an ideological reductionist at all, but he nevertheless boldly claimed that in the end, science is the measure of all things.²⁹ This raises the interesting question of whether some global modes of conscious experience are *closer* to the emerging scientific image than others—whether their underlying ontology maps more closely onto the scientific worldview than does ordinary waking consciousness, which is strongly shaped by biological imperatives. I think that nondual awareness could be a high-convergence mode in exactly this sense: a form of conscious experience that is suboptimal from a biological perspective but is closer to our best scientific understanding of what the conscious brain really does and what the deeper causal structure of the world actually is.

Let us call this the “convergence principle”: the idea that some global modes of consciousness, in terms of their underlying ontology and the way in which the ongoing process of conscious experience *itself* is portrayed by them, are actually closer to the scientific image of reality than others—and that MPE modes are special in precisely this regard. Take as an example a neuroscientist with whom we can communicate in real time,³⁰ who has a lucid dream and, while looking at the dream environment surrounding her, says: “This is all a virtual model of reality, sculpted out of the dynamics of the neural correlate of consciousness in my head! I embody this phenomenal space. I am actually walking around in myself!” Then, to see the convergence, compare this with an MPE mode that we might characterize as “lucid waking”—as described, for example, in report #2299 (cited in chapters 29 and 33): “I am the space in which everything appears. [. . .] When, e.g., I walk around, I have the sensation of walking around inside myself.” You may recall that in chapter 27, we first encountered this point when speculating that perhaps all facts are ultimately nondual, and that nondual awareness is the previously unnoticed point of convergence between human phenomenology and the scientific image of reality. I will briefly return to this question at the end of our journey. For now, let us stay with transparency, translucency, and virtuality.

The phenomenology of virtuality has been known for centuries. In many classical texts, including those of Tibetan Buddhism, we repeatedly find statements to the effect that the world may appear as a magical illusion or take on a dreamlike quality. What many of these traditional texts convey is a phenomenology of virtuality, and also of translucency (recall Moore’s term “diaphanousness,” whose root is the Greek *diaphainesthai*:

“to shine through”). In Aristotle’s ancient theory of perception, “the diaphanous” (*to diaphanês*) denoted the sensory-material medium in which the visual sense operates. We encountered what I call the phenomenology of translucency in chapter 24, “Bodiless Body-Experience,” when discussing the possibility that pure awareness has switched from background to foreground. The idea was that the background has become so dominant that what was previously the foreground becomes translucent, with some of its structural features (e.g., body boundaries) gently fading out or disappearing altogether.

In our reports, we sometimes find statements such as “It’s like reality shining through when all ideas, concepts . . . step aside for a moment” (#2528), or metaphors like that of a “very thinly veiled moon” (#2623). One participant described it by saying that “time did not exist anymore but I was very aware of the variations in my environment, my consciousness and my body were more ‘lucid’ and I was seeing things as if they were transparent; that is, I was feeling what was behind the phenomena [. . .]” (#1397). To make what I am describing as the phenomenology of translucency more intuitive, I would like to point out that the light involved in this type of metaphor is one that never throws any shadows. In terms of body-experience, translucency can also be described as a feeling of weightlessness and of the body itself becoming transparent—but this time, not in the abstract philosophical sense of representations being transparent (or opaque). In some reports, we find this transparency evoked as a concrete and direct form of phenomenal experience: Tactile and physical sensations acquired a kind of weightlessness or transparency that was not limited (#684).

In Tibetan Buddhism, the remaining content is variously described as being like a dream, an optical illusion, a hallucination, a mirage, an echo, an emanation, a reflection, or an apparition; it is compared to castles in the clouds, a city of heavenly beings, or the Moon reflected in water. For example, virtuality appears in the words of Dakpo Tashi Namgyal (ca. 1513–1587), who wrote one of humankind’s most profound meditation manuals, entitled *Clarifying the Natural State*, where he says that “you may have the experience that everything is like a dream and magical illusion.”³¹ Here, the warning to advanced practitioners is not to cling to these meditative experiences (or the three meditative “moods” of bliss, clarity, and nonthought) as if they were paramount, making the mistake of training “in a way that is fettered by them, being happy when they come and unhappy when they do not.”³² In *The Lamp of Precious Guidance*, Barawa Gyeltshen Pelsang’s (1310–1391) commentary on Yang Gönpa’s (1213–1258) *Song of the Seven Introductions*,³³ we find an instruction for the meditator who is eager to discover the experiential quality of “the many having one flavor” in everything that she consciously perceives: “There is no need for a meditation that tries to give up appearances, taking them as something extraneous. Rather, during this appearing,

one remains loosely poised in the state, prior to grasping, in which you don't have to meditate, yet are not distracted." There, we also find an explanation of what I call the phenomenology of virtuality, which includes the notion of external perceptual objects now being experienced as "vitreous floaters":

Although appearances manifest in many ways, they are of one taste within the nature of mind. By preserving things in this way, the duality between appearance and mind blends into one, so you no longer find any appearance that is not mind. At this point, since the entirety of what appears externally as the object and the entirety of what appears internally as the agent have resolved into this single state of nonduality, there is no more hindrance or attachment to external things, which are similar to vitreous floaters and the like. Then, the error of the belief in the reality of entities falls to pieces.³⁴

Vitreous floaters are impurities in the eye's vitreous humor, which is normally transparent. They can become particularly noticeable when looking at the open blue sky or a monochromatic surface. Typically, vitreous floaters appear as moving specks, as spots or wormlike strings in your visual field, and their motility, size, and shape can even be measured. They tend to multiply with age, as the vitreous gel gradually liquefies. Such "eye floaters" are called *mouches volantes* in French and *muscae volitantes* in Latin—in English, "flying flies."³⁵ Can you imagine a global mode of conscious experience in which *all* the contents of your experience have turned into one single *mouche volante*? How would it feel to suddenly enter a phenomenological mode in which what you previously took to be the world with yourself at the center has turned into a floater, a flying Ego Tunnel in the field of pure awareness?

In the present context, it is interesting to briefly recall Keith Dowman's perfect explanation of the classical Tibetan Buddhist idea of a new global state of translucent, nondual awareness created "by identifying with the all-pervading cognitive principle (*rigpa*) and then conceiving one's own body and the environment as a holistic gestalt, or hologram, projected within it."³⁶ *Rigpa* is one of the classic notions of pure awareness, and semantically, it has a very close relationship to what we are here gradually approximating as MPE—like a blind person tentatively learning about the elephant. It seems that early Buddhist scholar-practitioners did make a major phenomenological discovery that we can now begin to express more clearly using our new conceptual instruments. There is a possible phenomenological configuration in which (1) MPE has become clearly recognized, highly salient, and "translucent"; (2) MPE has been transformed into a nonegoic unit of identification (see chapter 29); and (3) all *other* conscious content acquires the phenomenal character of "virtuality" described in this chapter.

It is gradually becoming obvious that there is a wider context to the phenomenological concept of “nonduality.” The term can refer not only to the disappearance of body boundaries or a loss of the automatic distinction between subject and object, but also to the disappearance of the top-level hyperpriors “real” / “does not exist” or “is currently present” / “is currently absent.”³⁷ Phenomenologically, this results in a global quality of metaphysical indeterminacy, of ontological neither-nor-ness—which I have termed “virtuality.” In verbal reports, this may in turn yield paradoxical statements that two apparently incompatible things are true at the same time, or else claims of total ineffability. However, the phenomenological anchor may be the same for all such reports.

In chapter 14, when exploring the philosophical notion of *ataraxia*, we discovered that according to ancient Greek thinkers, the clear, unperturbed, and tranquil state of *ataraxia* results from a suspension of judgment about what is real and what is mere appearance. We also saw how Pyrrhonian skepticism was initially a solely intellectual enterprise but then unexpectedly transformed itself into a practice. The German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) came back to the Greek skeptics’ notion of abstaining from belief when he developed his method of *epoché* (ἐποχή). He said that if we want to seriously investigate the structure of our own conscious experience—something that meditators were doing for centuries before academic philosophers decided to start doing so in intellectual, theoretical ways, of course—then we must “bracket” the question of whether the natural world around us exists, or even more generally, what exists and what doesn’t. Husserl also described a form of “universal *epoché*” in which *all* existence assumptions regarding the external world are put in brackets.³⁸

It is interesting to note that you can do this using mindful perceptual attention, but you can also do it with your thinking mind. Husserl pointed out that to inquire into consciousness, we must learn to separate what he called the “act” of consciousness (i.e., the actual phenomenal state) from the “intentional object” (i.e., the content; what the state is directed at, such as the perceptual object to which it may refer). This bracketing (in German, *Einklammerung*) of assumptions has also been called “phenomenological reduction,” and it directly relates to the experience of suchness described in chapter 9 and to the phenomenology of virtuality investigated in this discussion. It is often misunderstood as a merely intellectual exercise, some kind of cognitive operation for armchair philosophers. It is not. Phenomenological reduction never was a solely intellectual enterprise; it is closely linked to the nonconceptual epistemic practice called “meditation.”

In a little-known essay called “On the Teachings of Gotama [Gautama] Buddha” (1925), Husserl notes:

That Buddhism—as it speaks to us from its pure original sources—is a religio-ethical methodology for soul purification and satisfaction of the highest dignity and worthiness [*Dignität*], thought through and practised with an almost unequalled inner consistency, energy, and noble attitude, must soon become clear to every devoted reader. Buddhism can be paralleled only with the highest configurations of the philosophical and religious spirit of our European culture. It is now our destiny to have to assimilate the (for us) completely new Indian way of thinking with the (for us) old way, which is being revived and strengthened through this contrast.³⁹

We can now see how the contemplative phenomenology of virtuality and metaphysical indeterminacy, as already described by early Buddhist meditators, relates to the philosophical idea of universal bracketing. If you will, it is not the academic armchair version, but the hardcore cushion version, that came first.

In closing, let us briefly recall that many of the experiential reports presented in this chapter and chapter 27 also show that the general computational principle of suspending priors, of episodically dissolving some of the brain’s “unconscious prejudices about reality,” applies not only to subject/object or existence/nonexistence divisions, but equally to the boundary between inside and outside. Not only can what we previously (in an egocentric and naively realistic manner) called “the world” be transformed into something aperspectival and virtual, but “the world” can actually become an “interior space” in a very special way that is hard to put into words. It is, so to speak, inside and outside at the same time. To explain this neglected phenomenological fact accurately is a major challenge for future research.

Great poets like Rainer Maria Rilke knew all of this long ago. I chose to put Rilke’s notion of *Weltinnenraum* (which roughly translates as “inner world-space”) in the title of this section because it gives us a perhaps more intuitive angle on the relevant modes of consciousness. Often, poetry addresses the same challenges that philosophers and scientists face. In the nondual phenomenology of *Weltinnenraum*, the world as a whole suddenly appears as embedded in an all-encompassing quality of lucid emptiness that permeates all sentient beings, a larger space in which the distinction of “inside” and “outside” has been suspended:

From almost all things there is a beckoning to feeling, from every turn there wafts in: Commemorate! [. . .] What have we experienced since the beginning, if not that one recognizes itself in the other? [. . .] Oh house, oh meadow slope, oh evening light, suddenly you bring it almost to our faces and stand by us, embracing and embraced. Through all beings reaches the one space: inner world-space. The birds fly silently through us. Oh, I who want to grow, I look out, and within me the tree grows.⁴⁰

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The Experience of Pure Consciousness: Philosophy,
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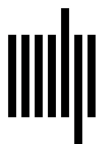
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