

29 The True Self

A well looks at a donkey, not vice versa [#33]

Self-image and infinity somehow fell into one. [#3024]

One of the many things that make a more genuinely *philosophical* meditation practice so interesting is that some of its aspects can be taught, while others can't. Some things you simply have to find out for yourself. Before we start, let us do a little demo. Be assured that you do not have to be a regular meditator to do this—all it really involves is noticing something that is already there. See whether you can verify this simple phenomenological truth in your own experience: Whenever you, the organism, move from one unit of identification to the next, your feeling of being, your sense of existence moves into the new unit too. This applies to getting lost in a daydream, but also to the experience of pure consciousness. Can you *be* the silence; can you *be* the knowingness? Whenever, in your conscious model of reality, you shift from a global mode of "I am the knowing self" to another mode, say to the experience of "I am a self-knowing field of awareness," then the "amness" comes along as well. Can you find this in your own experience? It cannot be taught because you cannot know it—you have to *be* it.

For some of the most interesting kinds of conscious experience, this seems to be a general principle: You cannot know it; you can only be it.¹ It certainly doesn't work every time. More often, you remain the attentive, knowing self looking *at* awareness. But if you unhook from the knowing self (i.e., from the entity that wants to find out more, tries to understand, and perhaps sometimes even meditates) by simply letting yourself fall back into the open space of wakeful awareness that already exists, then the "selfiness" disappears, but the "amness" perhaps remains part of that awareness. Can you find this? Again, it is one example of something that cannot really be taught. Later, when the knowing self has returned, it may even say: "I was uncontracted, awake

awareness!" This is because the "amness" came along despite the lack of self; and this is what I mean when, in what follows, I speak of "nonegoic units of identification."

When the phenomenal experience of awareness itself is stable and has coemerged with ordinary conscious content like colors, sounds, and movement, then it can sometimes happen that a fundamental shift takes place. This shift can be described in many ways. One is as an eversion: a turning inside out. To be more precise, it is not so much a shift in the content of consciousness itself, but rather a global transformation of its deep structure into a new mode, or a transformation of the *perspective* from which the world is known and experienced:

33 The state of looking at your own experience from the perspective of pure space. A well looks at a donkey, not vice versa.

3441 Normally I feel as if I'm behind my eyes, in my head. Pure awareness seems to occur when I am able to distance/separate whatever I am from the feeling of being behind my eyes or in my body. In some ways, it feels like my usual perspective reverses itself. I am not behind my eyes or in my body, but my eyesight and bodily sensations are appearing to me moment by moment.

These first two examples directly relate to the idea of a virtual world-model appearing in an uncentered space of nonconceptual knowing, as I discussed in chapter 28. They also clearly relate to the new concept of a zero-person perspective (chapter 3) and to the many examples of experiential eversion (e.g., background/foreground switch) that we have encountered in other chapters.

However, on a conceptual level, there is another way of approximating the phenomenological nature of this shift: namely, describing it as a shift in the phenomenological "unit of identification" (introduced in chapter 24). What is sometimes referred to as the "true self" forms the origin of the perspective from which the world is experienced, and it is what we identify with. For example, eversion (turning inside out) is a shift in the *point of origin* from which the perspective projects, as it were—dissolving or expanding the original vantage point into the space of knowing as a whole. Now it is as if the point of origin had turned into the space of origin—some sort of primordial space that now functions as that which really knows. You may remember that the phenomenological "unit of identification" quite simply refers to whatever set of experiential contents lead to and anchor self-descriptions of the form "I *am* this!" or "I *was* this!" It may be helpful to go through our series of concrete examples one more time.

If you say, "I am my body!" then the unit of identification is the conscious body-model in your brain plus the global experience of ownership that comes from controlling the body as a whole. If you say, "I am that which has feelings!" then the unit of

identification is the emotional self-model currently active in your brain, which also includes and arises out of inner body sensations, gut feelings, affective tone, and the like. If, like René Descartes, you say, “No, I am the thinking self, that which forms concepts and controls thought!” then the unit of identification is the brain’s conscious model of a cognitive agent, created by an “explaining-away” of the subtle sense of mental effort that comes with inner actions like mental calculation, logical thought, or an effort to concentrate. If you say, “I am that which meditates, that which mindfully brings the focus of attention back to the breath after noticing a stray thought!” then you are identifying with the subtle sense of effort that accompanies control of the focus of attention (the experiential quality of “attentional agency”) and with an almost automatically arising model of an entity that has just “done the noticing” (the mindful agent, the successful “meditative self”). And so on.

Here, the phenomenological discovery is that the phenomenal character of awareness *itself* can begin to function as the new unit of identification, but that it is selfless. The important conceptual point is that *nonegoic* units of identification clearly exist. We have already stumbled on this fact a number of times, such as when investigating the phenomenology of nothingness and bodiless body-experience. Again, please recall that the term “unit of identification” refers to whatever it is that phenomenological self-descriptions of the form “I *am* this!” or “I *was* this!” attempt to pick out. We can now see how in some cases, such descriptions are phenomenological stopgaps—and are actually false because there never was an “I” that identified “itself” with the experiential content in question. The surface grammar of such reports suggests a duality that never existed in the experience itself. To some people, it may even seem as though the old identification with a person *being* conscious was false. In hindsight, this is something that can even seem like a full-blown misidentification, as in the following:

897 [. . .] It is as if, without active striving or doing, a “shift” occurs of a “point of view” from which / in which perception takes place. It becomes obvious and undoubtedly “perceptible” and recognizable that awareness is constantly and exclusively aware of itself and that a previous perception conditioned by acquired convictions (I as a person WITH awareness am aware of a new object in constant succession) is factually false.

2953 During a period of sitting meditation, lasting about 2.5 hours, at some point my consciousness became aware of awareness, rather than of my meditation object (breath). I became aware of being aware, not in a place but just feeling as though I were a center, no body or body sensations or awareness of having a body or being anywhere. It was contentless as far as consciousness is concerned: dark and silent, having no qualities of time or place. Yet, I felt

just like being myself, but not being anything in particular, including being a human or individual person. In fact I really didn't even know I was in such a state, while yet being in it, until the mind suddenly produced a few thoughts, which I observed as if they were a phenomenon outside myself. I could hear the quality of them as if being part of a person that I recognized, but no longer identified with. When thoughts were not present I was aware, but not really conscious or thinking about being aware; it was just silent and empty.

3473 [. . .] it suddenly sunk in, at a deep visceral level there is no guy I all these years identified as me. I, as just a blank spectator, could see there is nobody inside. By nobody I mean no thinker or doer, just the awareness. I opened my eyes right after and the object before my eyes happened to be my son's stuffed toy he had left behind. That dog literally was also me at that moment. Feels stupid to say that now. I felt it so strongly that I almost broke down out of lightness and also sort of missing the person who I thought always existed but now knew never existed to begin with. [. . .]

It is interesting to see how meditators, in trying to accurately describe their own phenomenology, oscillate between interpreting it as being in touch with "the true self" or with "no self" at all. This oscillation relates to chapter 28's hypothetical suggestion that different types of paradoxical self-report might sometimes possess the same phenomenological anchor. The following three features make this more plausible. First, there seems to be a new quality of self-intimacy, of being in touch with oneself in a maximally direct way—closer to oneself than ever before. Second, this quality is "ahistorical": It has nothing to do with your private or public life history or with the egoic process of meaning-making and continuous narrative self-deception described in chapter 17. Third, in retrospect, it even has the character of transcendentalism, which means that it feels like a special kind of self that has "always already" been there as a condition of possibility for everything else (more about this in chapter 31):

173 The sense of self was greatly changed. I would not say that there was no "I" present. It was more like a strong feeling of intimacy with oneself. Filling everything out. Not an "I" in the sense of a person with a history. But the most familiar, connected, fulfilling feeling of an "I" that I experience. It has always been there. It is completely satisfied. There is also a component that I would call "sober." In a very pleasant, light, bright, free sense. Not tainted by the heat of the usual stories.

2668 I had an experience of pure experiencing in which I became aware of myself. I became aware that the self is absolute and that nothing is "before" it. [. . .]

From a philosophical perspective, an important question is whether there are any global modes of conscious experience in which human beings spontaneously stop using the first-person pronoun “I.” In this context, one interesting detail is that some meditators put “I” in quotation marks when trying to communicate the relevant experience in writing, while others use capitals (for the German “*ICH*”). Please also note that many of the phenomenological aspects investigated in previous chapters coemerge in situations in which the old, personal-level self is bracketed. Here are some examples:

280 [. . .] Previously I had practiced yoga and running only very sporadically and for health/fitness reasons. Suddenly these forms of movement gained a completely new dimension and meaning for me, a meditative depth. In the movement I could perceive that there was something different, something deeper within me, that I am real and that this has nothing to do with my body, name, or preferences. Particularly significant experiences occurred first while walking in the forest, later also suddenly while moving through my normal everyday life (in the office, while walking through my apartment). In these moments I became aware that my body was moving while “I” could observe and perceive it and everything else. These states are very pleasant, calm, and completely harmonious.

937 After my thoughts had moved away, I felt an optically and acoustically empty, boundless space far away from any sense of time and with regularly flowing vibrations “through me.” This *I* [*ICH*] seemed to be bodiless and boundless. At the same time a feeling of absolute peace and harmony with everything.

3320 [. . .] The “I” used here is a formulation in retrospect; at that moment it did not exist, did not matter. It was absolute presence in absolute presence of everything that surrounded and contained everything at the same time. Boundaries, even physical ones, did not exist. A “sensation,” “feeling,” “perception” of flowing, taking, giving, sending, and receiving, absolute alertness, contentment, and suchness.

2954 [. . .] Dissolving the boundaries of the body, the feeling of falling into space- and timelessness, dark living emptiness in which there was breathing. There was a consciousness (observer/attentiveness) that controlled this without “me” wanting anything. It was looking around in wonder, listening in wonder to the silence, just breathing. And an experience of deep peace in and with everything. [. . .]

2900 Afterward calmness returned and a strong identification with the space/ground of the experience took place. Emotions came and went without being

identified with them; perception happened in such a way that they were only content and not part of what was felt as “I.” Strong sense of self-knowledge. Absence of fear. Feeling that the “I” will remain intact, regardless of what is perceived as the content of the experience. [. . .] Feeling that the “I” is unchangeable, boundless, and constant. Feeling of silence resting in itself.

Some long-term practitioners explicitly say that they *identify* with pure awareness. Pure awareness is the epistemic space in which everything else appears, but it can also be empty. There are qualities of unity, pure presence, unboundedness, silence, and timelessness to it. Experientially, this specific phenomenological aspect can be more or less clear, more or less frequent; it can appear suddenly or it can stabilize itself over a lifetime. There are episodes of full immersion, but there is also the stable phenomenology of a continuous background. Let me close this section by presenting four typical reports (other examples are found in #2206, #1682, #1703, #1786, #1935, and #3906):

1315 [. . .] My favorite word: bliss-consciousness. I identify with it: I am pure consciousness, but not my body, and it is the same experience in and outside of meditation since my childhood, but I perceive this inner being more and more clearly. My consciousness does not change, my infinite inner being is complete, but the perception of this being increases in quality and quantity. [. . .]

3285 I experience my self as unity of pure consciousness in which I am simply allowed to linger. A state of freedom, despite mental and physical limitations.

3294 It was as if everything disappeared, body, mind, space and time, but awareness itself was still present. There were no particular qualities that involved self-reflection, like emotion etc., until after the experience ended and I was again aware of my surroundings. This particular “pure presence” involved the emptiness of all content except awareness itself. As if awareness is the only thing that exists, but I am that awareness and not separate from it.

2299 [. . .] The falling-away of identification with the limited person. I am not in the world—the world is in me! I am the space in which everything appears. This is an experience that has remained until today. When e.g., I walk around I have the sensation of walking around inside myself. It is a sensation of infinity. The body does not end at the obvious body boundaries, it is infinitely large. And there is only one thing. THIS. Everything is this THIS, or pure awareness, or pure consciousness or God or presence. The sensation that I MYSELF am everything that appears, this ONE, the WHOLE. There seem to be two states of consciousness running simultaneously. The SILENCE (pure awareness) as the basis of all being is always there and at the same time the processes in the

world of form, which however is no longer experienced as different from the SILENCE. Therefore the impression is there that nothing is really happening.

Nonegoic Units of Identification and the View from Nowhere

Essentially I have no particular point of view at all, but apprehend the world as centerless. As it happens, I ordinarily view the world from a certain vantage point, using the eyes, the person, and the daily life of TN as a kind of window. But the experiences and the perspective of TN with which I am directly presented are not the point of view of the true self, for the true self has no point of view and includes in its conception of the centerless world TN and his perspective among the contents of that world.

—Thomas Nagel (born 1937), *The View from Nowhere*

At this point, a topic arises that dominated centuries of Indian philosophy: Conceptually, should we interpret this general type of experience—the kind of experience that is also described by our participants in the reports given in the previous section—in terms of “no self” or “true self”?² As Matthew MacKenzie has pointed out, it could be the case that an enduring, substantial self exists, even if there are phenomenally selfless episodes of experience. Or it could be the case that some minimal sense of self or subject is an inherent feature of human phenomenal consciousness, even though no such entity as the self exists.³ The phenomenology itself seems to underdetermine all possible philosophical interpretations. Should we follow the path of Buddhist metaphysics, or that of Advaita Vedanta?

For anyone who chooses to describe the all-pervading quality of awareness itself as their true and timeless self, this self now becomes the epistemically open, empty, and boundless space investigated in chapters 4 and 23. But there are conceptual problems lurking in the background. First, “truth” is a property of sentences, not of selves: Sentences are true or false, and if one looks closely, it is quite unclear what it could actually mean to say that a self is “true.” Is this way of speaking more than some unwarranted form of metaphysical essentialism, perhaps motivated by an unconscious need for mortality denial (chapter 17)? Second, taking a more practical perspective, how are you, the meditating self, ever meant to “become one” with something that is neither one nor many? We have seen that minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) is a phenomenological domain without individuation, an open space of conscious experience that cannot be divided into countable entities—not even a single one—and in chapter 5, we also briefly touched on Śāntarakṣita’s “neither-one-nor-many” argument. Some may be intuitively inclined to think that, metaphysically, there could be only

one “true self.” And since phenomenologically it lacks any individual characteristics, it would seem logical that there could never be many of them.⁴ So is there only one single “true self” in our entire universe? As a matter of fact, some of our meditators go so far as to describe what I would like to term the “phenomenology of solipsism.” Solipsism (from the Latin *solus*, “alone,” and *ipse*, “self”) is a class of philosophical positions claiming that nothing outside the self or one’s own mind exists—no external world, no other selves or minds. Everything is part of a single self or inside a single mind. Here is an example: “I felt an awareness that I was the only being in existence. There was nothing but me” (#2344). In this new context, you may perhaps remember the “principle of phenomenal correlates” introduced in chapter 19: Namely, for every metaphysical theory that philosophers have developed, there is an altered state or mode of consciousness that directly corresponds to it.

We can now see that the ancient metaphysical intuition of “true self” does have a phenomenological anchor—even if some of its conceptual expressions lack coherence. As the phenomenology of “unboundedness” (investigated in chapters 5 and 23) is a prototypical core feature of MPE, it is hard to conceive of *multiple* instances of pure consciousness juxtaposed with each other, or of multiple spaces conceived of as particular entities. Yet, if one looks more closely, there is also no phenomenal character of singularity in bare awareness per se, just as there is no inherent plurality. Again, this phenomenological observation directly relates to Śāntarākṣita’s classic “neither-one-nor-many” argument in the *Madhyamakālaṅkāra*. So we find that for many classical philosophical positions, there is an anchor in contemplative experience—but the phenomenology itself underdetermines the metaphysics, so different interpretations always seem to remain possible. By now, you will not be surprised to hear that I plan to sidestep this whole issue—one reason being that this time-honored metaphysical debate rests on a false phenomenological opposition. It presents a false alternative: The possible alternatives are incompletely described because other cases are possible (philosophers speak here of a false conclusion by false disjunction). Given our new conceptual tool of a “nonegoic unit of identification,” we can elegantly bypass the no-self versus true-self dichotomy. Doing so may reveal a middle way that does more justice to the actual phenomenology, resulting in a richer and finer-grained account. Let me explain.

A third way to describe the relevant phenomenological transition from the state of being contracted into a knowing self to a state of vast epistemic openness is as a change in the unit of identification to MPE, or as a shift from what was previously the transparent content of the conscious self-model to pure awareness. It is only natural that meditators, in the absence of alternative linguistic tools, later try to describe it as a transformation in sense of self, in the phenomenal character that philosophers

sometimes describe as the quality of “selfhood.” But what this shift leads to really is something *new*, something that is certainly not an object, but that also lacks some—though perhaps not all—features of what we once called a “subject” or a “self.”

If we want to say that pure awareness can function as a nonegoic unit of identification, we need a clear definition of what “nonegoic” means. In his contribution to a collection of texts titled *Radical Disruptions of Self-Consciousness* (which we edited together and which is freely available online), the French philosopher Raphaël Millière did an excellent job of teasing apart the most important varieties of selflessness. After distinguishing six notions of self-consciousness commonly discussed in the literature, he argued that none of the corresponding features is necessary for consciousness because there are states of consciousness in which each of them is plausibly missing. Importantly, he also pointed out that we have preliminary empirical evidence for the existence of some states of consciousness that lack *all* of these six putative forms of self-consciousness. So is pure awareness nonegoic, in the sense of being totally, radically selfless, or is there perhaps some implicit residue of phenomenal subjectivity in it—maybe a hidden inner perspective, a subtle form of “selfiness” that remains?

Here is a quick overview of Millière’s six types of self-consciousness:

1. *Cognitive self-consciousness*: Thinking of oneself as oneself
2. *Spatial self-consciousness*: Being conscious of one’s location (with respect to one’s perceived environment) as one’s own
3. *Sense of bodily ownership*: Being conscious of one’s body as one’s own
4. *Sense of bodily agency*: Being conscious of one’s bodily actions as one’s own
5. *Sense of mental ownership*: Being conscious of one’s mental states as one’s own
6. *Sense of mental agency*: Being conscious of one’s mental actions as one’s own

Let us begin with the first point on the list. Clearly MPE has nothing to do with thinking, although it can at rare times coexist with spontaneously arising thought, even “translucently” permeate such thought. But none of the case studies presented in this chapter is an example of thinking of oneself as oneself.

What about the second point? Millière skips self-location in a temporal, as opposed to a spatial, frame of reference (i.e., “temporal self-consciousness”), which is actually an important, necessary feature of minimal phenomenal selfhood.⁵ It is related to what in German is called *Anwesenheit*—namely, the phenomenology of self-presence in a temporal sense, of being present as a self *now*, by being conscious of the present moment as one’s *own* lived moment, the only one in which *oneself* currently exists. Being a conscious self necessarily means identifying with a point in time, embodying a lived Now, and this feature is absent in the timelessness of MPE.

But let's return to spatial self-location. Could one say that the reports given in the first half of this chapter count as being conscious "of your location in your perceived environment as your own"? In full-absorption episodes, MPE occurs in the absence of any perceived environment (#3294, cited earlier in this chapter, is one example). We saw that in other cases, the conscious body-model may have disappeared, lost its boundaries, or still be present, but it is not owned (Millière's third feature) in the sense of being what Thomas Nagel called the "locus of identification," which involves phenomenologically marking out one's *own* location in space.

What about the next point: the sense of bodily agency, the experience of currently being conscious of your bodily actions as your own, the feeling of being the entity that controls them? Report #280 in the first part of this chapter is an excellent example of how the character of pure awareness can be experienced in motion, while running or doing asanas, but without the sense of bodily agency. Here, we have the phenomenology of bodily motion, but without effort, without the contracted sense of control that normally accompanies it—there is no "physical agent model." Some of our reports are reminiscent of the phenomenology of witness consciousness investigated in chapter 19, like the "blank spectator" mentioned in #3473, and we find something very similar happening for mental ownership and mental agency (Millière's fifth and sixth features). For example, take report #2953: "[. . .] the mind suddenly produced a few thoughts, which I observed as if they were a phenomenon outside myself. I could hear the quality of them as if being part of a person that I recognized, but no longer identified with." In sum, none of the reports in this chapter describing the experience of becoming one with the quality of pure awareness mentions mental ownership or mental agency.

I think that it makes good sense to say that the phenomenal character of pure awareness in and of itself is nonegoic, in that it satisfies none of the six constraints listed by Millière. Since many of the relevant reports explicitly mention the quality of timelessness, we can infer that temporal self-location in terms of "nowness" and "self-presence"—both of which are forms of conscious time experience—does not play a role either. The phenomenological core of egoic self-awareness seems to lie in the sense of effortful control that accompanies goal-directed bodily and especially mental agency. Egoic self-awareness is anchored in the ongoing minimization of prediction error via active inference. This most prominently includes the experience of deliberate, goal-directed thought and of actively controlling the focus of attention, but our egoic self-model also bottoms out in diffuse feeling tones and "gut-level selfhood," the weaker and slightly vaguer bodily sense of simply being alive, which is created by low-level *interoceptive* inference (i.e., continuous control of inner states of the body).⁶ You are an ego in the strong sense when you navigate the world with the help of an

epistemic agent model, when there is not only bodily self-awareness and the fluctuation of gut-level awareness plus feeling tone (i.e., the emotional background arising out of it) but also a robust knowing self, actively attending and thinking.

The quality of mental agency is really the one that leads to contraction; the sense of effort that comes from hallucinating a goal-state—the specific experiential quality emerging from the process of quashing prediction error on the mental level—is what counts. Whenever you identify with pure awareness, none of this is the case: In a way, you are like a conscious organism running a new operating system. This organism is now employing a different kind of ontology for segmenting reality, navigating the world under a nonegoic unit of identification. If this is correct, the resulting MPE mode should be characterized by an all-pervading quality of effortlessness.

Using our new tools, we can also say that the phenomenology sometimes described as “true self” is one in which the experience of knowing is no longer *contracted*. It is one example of a shift from the first-person perspective of an active, information-hungry self to the zero-person perspective of knowingness itself—that is, to an uncontracted version of the phenomenal signature of knowing (chapter 18). The first-person perspective is the perspective that you take when you ascribe conscious experiences to yourself using the first-person pronoun: *I myself* am having this thought, *I* hear music from a distance, *I* am observing my breath, or *I* am trying to meditate. There is also a third-person perspective: A neuroscientist is looking at your brain from the outside, maybe while you are having thoughts or are trying to meditate. The scientist can then ascribe properties to you from an external perspective: *His* default-mode network is highly active; *her* posterior cingulate cortex is slowly getting deactivated. The scientist could also do this without knowing who you are: *This* default-mode network is highly active; *that* posterior cingulate cortex is slowly deactivated. Your first-person perspective, on the other hand, is your very own, individual perspective on the world; it is what makes conscious experience subjective, what makes it seem to be intrinsically tied to a single, knowing self. Philosophers and scientists, therefore, have thought long and hard about whether the first-person perspective can be reduced to the third-person perspective, or whether there are mysterious “first-person facts,” radically *subjective* facts that cannot be fully grasped by the scientific method. And this finally brings us back to Thomas Nagel.

Nagel’s beautiful idea of the View from Nowhere bears considerable structural similarity to some of the phenomenological reports presented in this book. He thought that there had to be something like a “true self,” a subject of a centerless view of the world, and that this self “seems incapable of being anyone in particular.”⁷ This “objective” or “true” self actually apprehends the world from the outside rather than from a standpoint within it. In a very interesting way, Nagel drew attention to the fact that

there is in *some* sense an “objective” point of view, from which his connection with the specific person named “Thomas Nagel” seems entirely arbitrary. It’s interesting to recall that some spiritual teachers, such as Nisargadatta (chapter 19), have claimed that this connection can “snap” altogether.

Thomas Nagel’s *The View from Nowhere* also speaks to the convergence principle (introduced in chapter 28), which says that nondual awareness may involve hitherto unnoticed points of convergence between contemplative phenomenology and the scientific image of reality. Nagel thought that any solution to the philosophical problem that he was pointing to would have to bring “the subjective and objective conceptions of the world” into harmony.⁸ Isn’t there a sense in which nondual awareness achieves exactly this?

Nagel also said that even if his own verbal exposition of the problem turned out to be faulty, his goal was to “evoke a sharp intuitive puzzle” so as to convince readers that there was *something* real in it. When you think about it, there is something deeply unintelligible, or perhaps even absurd (chapter 17), in the idea that given the vastness of the physical universe—“in those oceans of space and time”—each of us should really be just one single embodied ego, one minuscule person among countless equally contingent others. The absurdity results from what I call the “inbuilt metaphysical megalomania of the self”: How can I—indeed, how can any real ego—be something so unimportant, so highly contingent? Aren’t I in some sense *necessarily* the person I am? Of course, the metaphysical megalomania of the self (which cannot really conceive of its own nonexistence) mirrors some classic philosophical arguments for the existence of God: If there is a supreme being, it exists because its necessary existence is self-evidently contained in the very *idea* of a supremely perfect being. The ego is a supreme being that cannot imagine the world without itself in it. But could all of us actually take on an impersonal standpoint, the zero-person perspective, while detaching ourselves from this specific, locally embodied ego? Could we thereby come to view the egoic self as, in Nagel’s own words, “a momentary blip on the cosmic TV screen”? Here is Nagel again:

How can I, who am thinking about the entire, centerless universe, be anything so specific as *this*: this measly, gratuitous creature existing in a tiny morsel of space-time, with a definite and by no means universal mental and physical organization? How can I be anything so *small* and *concrete* and *specific*?⁹

Many years ago, I was deeply fascinated by the fourth chapter of *The View from Nowhere*.¹⁰ We should bear in mind however that Nagel’s “true self” is only an intellectual exercise, not a phenomenal experience like those exemplified by the reports presented in this chapter. Nagel is only *thinking* about “the entire, centerless universe”

and the difficulty of returning to his normal, individual viewpoint afterward. His theory originated not on a meditation cushion, but in a philosophical armchair. Yet, one of the many aspects that remain interesting in Nagel's treatment is the idea of using the "vantage point" of an individual person as a kind of window. The neuroscience of consciousness is beginning to show that phenomenal models of reality are precisely such windows: lived representations via which we interact with the world and with ourselves. In ordinary states of consciousness, the bodily self-model is one such window, and what we have called the "knowing self" is another. But what I have termed a "non-egoic unit of identification" is just such a window too. It defines a mode of conscious experience. As the phenomenological material presented in this chapter demonstrates, it is something that occurs in the real experiences of real people, not just in fancy philosophical thought experiments. It happens every day, all over the world. Here is one last example, taken from an earlier publication of mine: "[. . .] there's no personal point of view, it's the world point of view, it's like the world looking, not ME looking, the world is looking."¹¹

Pure awareness, whenever it has transformed into the all-encompassing nonegoic unit of identification, strongly resembles what Thomas Nagel called "the objective self" or the "true self," which he described as "the subject of a perspectiveless conception of reality."¹² This subject is the origin of what in chapter 3 I called the "zero-person perspective," and what *really* appears from this perspective is not some philosopher's intellectual "conception" but the content of a full-blown, conscious model of reality in the brain of a biological organism. In this model, there is no real, individual vantage point because this is not only the "view from nowhere," it is the "view of nobody."¹³

We can now connect the idea of an out-of-brain-experience (chapter 28), the phenomenological motif of an "inversion," and Rilke's beautiful idea of *Weltinnenraum*, or "inner world-space" (chapters 27 and 28) in an interesting way. If we add current scientific findings, a whole new picture may emerge: The content of conscious experience is the content of a phenomenal model of reality in the brain, a comprehensive inner image of reality. This much seems plausible. Normally, of course, this image includes a model of the biological body. We know that, too. This body model includes, for example, our arms, legs, eyes, ears, and head, but also the perception of our own breath, abdominal sensations, or the sense of balance. What is completely missing from this body model, however, is the brain in which all of this is created in the first place. We do not feel our brain and the space of cognition opened up by it; they are not part of our subjective life world. Or are they?

The content of the phenomenal model of reality is, according to experience, something that lies outside the brain. The world is an outside world: It is independent of

mind and consciousness. Then there is the body, which we also feel from the inside. The body is in a situation, but this inner and outer experience of situatedness is phenomenologically still out-of-brain; it certainly does not belong in our brain or in our head. Or does it?

Is “being-in-the-world” perhaps an abstract aspect of what the concrete biological brain does in our head—something virtual? A mere model, a simulation of externality and independence of consciousness? We have seen that in rare states of consciousness, an inversion can occur. First, the distinction between inside and outside gradually disappears. Like a hypothesis without confirmation by new empirical data, it becomes weaker and weaker; gradually the distinction is recognized as something merely virtual. Thus, what was previously outside becomes a new inside. World and body gain a certain quality of virtuality and interiority, for they are no longer independent of consciousness.

The result, however, is not the interiority of a cognizing ego, but rather what one of our study participants described in the following words: “I am the space in which everything happens” (see #66 or #2299 in chapter 33). What in chapter 27 I called the “single-embodiment constraint” seems to be temporarily lifted. The world itself is now experienced as a kind of nonegoic interior space; this is Rainer Maria Rilke’s “inner world-space.” But what exactly is it that has been upended? The first-person perspective? The phenomenal signature of knowledge? Is it the whole conscious model of reality that suddenly recognizes itself as a model?¹⁴

You will recall that the zero-person perspective describes the phenomenology of knowing the world, but not as a knowing self, as a thinking person, or even from the vantage point of a particular location. Rather, it is as if epistemic space itself, or even the world as a whole, is silently looking at what is happening within itself. And the interesting discovery is that precisely this passive epistemic space can sometimes function as the new, nonegoic unit of identification.

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

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Citation:

*The Elephant and the Blind: The Experience of Pure Consciousness: Philosophy,
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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

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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>