

30 Pure Awareness Knows Itself

“But is this ‘pure awareness?’,” asks the thinking mind, and something else simply knows. [#1575]

Experiencing the phenomenal character of awareness itself is an ongoing process that we might call “meta-awareness,” but only if we keep in mind that it is an entirely nonconceptual process leading to an entirely holistic experiential quality. In pure awareness itself, there is no structure, nothing looking down at or monitoring some first-order state. Phenomenologically, there is no hierarchy and no “higher-order state.” Minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) is not a form of thinking. Rather, as we saw in chapter 27, it can be related to a nonpropositional form of meta-awareness.¹ In this sense, it can be *described* as involving an awareness of awareness, but phenomenologically, the experience itself is not mediated by any form of thought or mental formation of concepts (it has nothing to do with what scientists call “metacognition”). MPE is also not pure awareness plus the recognitional thought, “*Now* my mind is completely clear and silent!” As meditators know only too well, this kind of subtle background thought—“I am currently not having a single thought!,” “This is it!,” or “Here we go again, *finally* . . .”—is a common means by which the predictive process of selfing cleverly tries to bootstrap itself back into existence.

If one looks closer, there seem to be at least two kinds of meta-awareness that can be involved in the experiential character of MPE. The first kind still includes an observer and a stable, inward-directed perspective. I will call this the phenomenology of “dual meta-awareness” because it still includes subject and object. Here is one example of dual mindfulness:

3499 Becoming conscious of the fact that one is conscious is not difficult, indeed it is immediately accessible. There is, after all, a subjective component, an experience that I can immediately make myself aware of, and that distinguishes me

from a piece of wood or a robot. I can only assume this for others, but with myself I know it from my own experience. In meditation “on the mind” I first connect with this experience, differentiating it from the contents of consciousness that are being experienced. An observer position in relation to the contents in the mind: thoughts, images, possibly emotions, possibly bodily sensations or sensory impressions that “push their way in,” although I actually want to focus on the pair “experiencer and mental contents.” This feels like a silent observer in a dark space in which thoughts, images, etc. surface. I am not very good at maintaining stability here, i.e., quickly a thought grabs me and I am distracted. But as long as I remain “awake,” i.e., undistracted, it is clearly distinguishable that I can remain in silence as an observer, even if there is a lot of movement in the mind.

Dual meta-awareness involves what we termed the phenomenal signature of knowing because it also includes a subjective sense of confidence (chapters 18 and 25). However, some of our meditators report that at times, the experience of pure awareness includes not only the phenomenal character of “knowingness,” but also a distinct quality of “the knowing knowing *itself*.” There seems to be a nondual variant of meta-awareness. In this second form of MPE meta-awareness, it is as if the phenomenal signature of knowing dynamically folds back into itself, silently but continuously reembedding awareness into itself. There is a distinct experiential quality that from now on, we can call the “phenomenal signature of *self*-knowing.” However, the relevant experiential quality is entirely nonegoic, in the sense of having nothing agentive to it. This means that it is effortless; it is not a reaction to anything; it is not goal-directed; and accordingly, it does not involve a consciously experienced sense of control. It is not owned. There is also no autobiographical component to it (it appears as timeless and spontaneously present, and there is no sort of “inner narrative” whatsoever), and it does not involve any form of personal-level self-representation (there is no expression of personality traits or self-conscious cognitive agency, including self-directed thoughts or emotions). It is holistic; it lacks internal structure; and if we take the phenomenology seriously, then “meta” suddenly seems like an inappropriate term—something artificial, something imported from an external third-person perspective. In this second kind of nonconceptual meta-awareness, there is a strong phenomenological sense in which it has nothing to do with *you*.

Perhaps most important, this phenomenological variant feels like a *nondual* variety of metaknowledge, like a particularly intimate way of being in contact with oneself: Yes, awareness is aware of itself, but no, the phenomenological profile does not involve subject and object. Dual mindfulness is a *subjective* state of experience (as in the first example

in this chapter); awareness being aware of itself isn't. Yet both are clearly conscious. This is what I mean when, throughout, I say that the minimal model approach dissolves the problem of subjectivity for consciousness science. In this phenomenological sense, some minimal forms of consciousness are not forms of subjective experience. Again, the self-cognizing but phenomenologically pure and unstructured form of awareness created by nondual mindfulness has nothing to do with *you*, but it also is not some reified entity that is *opposed* to you—because the phenomenal character of self-knowing created by awareness becoming acquainted with itself is not a thing at all, but a process. In the process of getting to know oneself, consciousness “awakens to itself,” so to speak, and generates a nonegoic variant of self-awareness and self-confidence. It is therefore better not to describe it as some sort of higher-order “meta”-state at all, but rather to describe it in terms of what philosophers might want to call the dynamic process of “subpersonal first-order reflexivity.” In case you are interested, I will offer a bit of philosophical theory in the hors d'oeuvres in this chapter. But let us first have some dessert, in the form of a careful look at a selection of reports describing the actual experience:

101 [. . .] It was a clear awareness, but with no thoughts; nondual (no subject-object, but not so much of wholeness). I was not quite sure about (or did not feel) “time” or “space” or “thought” or “body.” But I knew that something/someone (I take it as me) exists then and there. It was certainly not “enlightenment,” just the awareness manifested itself while no thoughts were present. It is the background awareness behind any thoughts and perceptions, and it knows itself.

There is an element of certainty in being in a state of nondual self-knowing because it is precisely a form of knowing that one knows. But the element of certainty cannot be reified. A better description would be as a process of nonconceptually knowing that *knowing currently takes place*. Therefore, the distinct quality that we just termed the “phenomenal signature of self-knowing” also implies a dynamic inner experience of self-certainty. One participant interestingly described this element of nonegoic self-certainty as a form of “pride”:

151 [. . .] What makes this moment so certain is a kind of inner clarity, a kind of pride that consciousness takes in experiencing itself in this state. But this is no ordinary pride, it is like a knowledge of inner strength in a confrontation that needs no action, but is freed from all expectations and unfolds very spontaneously. [. . .]

Phenomenologically, we could also describe this kind of first-order reflexivity within pure awareness as self-cognizance without reification:

156 This was mostly an experience of emptiness, not as an object, but as emptiness/consciousness cognizing itself. There was a lot of clarity (consciousness cognizing itself) and a joy that lasted for several days. [. . .]

It can also be described as attention having come to rest in itself:

1037 I have learned to focus my attention [. . .] on the mind itself, not on the contents of the mind (i.e., thoughts, sensory stimuli, or anything concrete). It is then as if attention is simply resting within attention itself. If I do this for a long time, for example in a meditation retreat, a feeling of light soon spreads in the mind. The mind is then light. [. . .] It is like another plane of existence. I do not have the feeling that “I” am having this feeling, rather the feeling is far beyond personal identity. Most of the time I am not completely absorbed into this feeling, so I am still nevertheless aware of myself. But I sense that it is possible to let go of oneself more and more completely. This is what I practice.

If one looks for the phenomenal quality that, in the title of this chapter, I have provisionally called “pure awareness knows itself,” then interesting combinations with many of our earlier descriptors can be found—like epistemic openness, calm, silence, emptiness and fullness, nondual being, background/foreground eversion, spaciousness, luminosity, suchness, wholeness, and the potential for full absorption. On the other hand, all seven phenomenological markers of *egoic* self-awareness discussed in chapter 29 (i.e., cognitive self-consciousness, spatial and temporal self-location, agency, and ownership in body and in mind) are lacking. What the material clearly shows is that a reflexive and nondual variant of MPE does exist. Phenomenologically, it is perhaps best described as a nonegoic signature of self-knowing. To let you judge for yourself, I will close this section by presenting eighteen examples without further comment:

1268 Awareness of awareness in vastness, silence, calm. [. . .]

1316 [. . .] Sometimes perception of complete emptiness, then self-referential blissful being. [. . .]

1350 [. . .] When the relevant state arises, it is like seeing seeing, or awareness of being aware.

1545 [. . .] A nonphysical space was emerging in me that was growing moment by moment and in which the boundaries were blurring between the perceiver and the perceived object. At the same time this space was conscious of itself. [. . .]

1582 [. . .] It was odd, as I kept experiencing no thoughts, just emptiness, yet it was “fullness” at the same time. The body felt like it dissolved and what was left was my awareness, being aware of itself. [. . .]

1617 Experiencing awareness of consciousness or of cognizance as such. That which is known recedes very much into the background, into the periphery

- of consciousness. In the center was the cognizance that is at rest in itself!
[. . .]
- 1623 I experienced awareness of awareness last year for the first time after 10 years of meditating. It was effortless. And now I can do it all the time.
- 1662 I had the distinct experience of awareness/consciousness knowing itself several times, but in this particular case [. . .] the experience was fairly long-lasting (~10+ minutes). Although thoughts and associated feelings and (faint) bodily sensations still occasionally arose, there was an increasing feeling of spaciousness that had no owner and seemed softly bright. The thoughts (including thoughts about the experience) continued to be intermittently present, but they were just occurring in this “space” without coloring the experience. [. . .]
- 1712 I experienced awareness itself. Not in the sense that I was experiencing awareness; there was no “me,” no “observer.” Awareness itself was always already aware.
- 1788 [. . .] A deeper state is reached when the emptiness withdraws into itself within “me” and becomes aware of itself. First I feel a “pulling” within me; something draws me toward itself and it feels as if this does not come of my own volition, but is done with me. I experience the pulling in the region of my head, and seeing is reversed: Instead of looking outward, the gaze turns back onto itself. [. . .]
- 1978 [. . .] The participants had the task of finding their true self and sharing it with the group at the end. In the course of this meditation it became clear to me not only cognitively but also emotionally that this self could not be found, but was merely a consciousness that can be observed by another kind of consciousness. Pure consciousness without I without thoughts without nothing. [. . .]
- 2007 [. . .] The experience was the noticing of noticing. There was no personality associated with the noticing, no discernible quality; just the awareness of awareness, as such.
- 2120 [. . .] Also, I became aware of the fact that “thought” does not have primacy in my experience, rather awareness has the primacy. Thought is occurring in this awareness which is also aware of itself.
- 2375 [. . .] Then I had a feeling of greater awareness in which I became more aware of both the thoughts passing through my mind and the experience of being the observer of the thoughts rather than the thinker of the thoughts. It was as if I became detached from myself, but not bodily or emotionally. I want to say I felt peaceful, but it was more like a cessation of thoughts and bodily

sensation and the replacement of that with a feeling of wholeness. It did not feel external to me, but rather like a state that I would be able to return to as the experience felt like it was drawn from me. It felt like it could potentially continue forever. I don't know how to explain that I felt like myself (whatever that is) while also feeling like a camera observing myself. [. . .]

2474 [. . .] By dropping my desire to react, the whole bodily experience fell away, producing an intense flare-up from the bottom up, with great astonishment and intensity, almost destabilizing. I find myself leaping backward toward nothing, and the experience of awareness shows itself in its entirety, without a possible "me" between the knowing and the being of the experience. [. . .]

2710 All thoughts inside and outside were like a reflection, there was only being, self-recognizing awareness. [. . .]

3323 [. . .] There was only a kind of very delicate smouldering, a last remnant of consciousness that was now conscious only of itself and nothing else. In the years since then, this "experience" has stabilized, that is to say that pure consciousness is also aware of itself in everyday life. [. . .]

3464 [. . .] Once in this state, sensations can be largely suppressed, then it feels as if consciousness is perceiving itself, consciousness feels "naked." In a way, there is then no more focus, because perception itself is being felt. [. . .]

That Which Never Speaks

This naked clarity and emptiness beyond the intellect—
 Letting it naturally be itself, it will see itself. [. . .]
 Its self-recognition is the key point of practice.
 As it meets itself face to face, it dissolves into itself.
 —Rgyal ba Yang Dgon pa (1213–1258),
Song of the Seven Introductions II (2, 4)

The point is to remain without fabrication in the continuum of recognition.
 —Longchen Rabjam (1308–1363), *The Precious Treasury of the Basic Space of Phenomena* (11)

When there is stillness, recognize just that within the stillness and sustain
 it with reflexively aware mindfulness.
 —Dakpo Tashi Namgyal (ca. 1513–1587), *Moonbeams of Mahāmudrā* II (10)

Pure awareness knowing itself is an entirely nonconceptual affair. "Recognizing" pure awareness is not a form of active, conceptual thought, and it does not involve the

quality of ownership. In and of itself, it is entirely silent, free of mental action. The epistemic agent model (chapter 25) has given way to a state of innocence. There is no accompanying thought like “Now it is aware of itself!” or “Now I actually *am* pure awareness that directly knows itself!” The phenomenology of pure awareness knowing itself also never contains some knowing self quietly saying “I think *this* must be it!” to itself, or asking “Is this *really* it? This is too simple . . .”

To be sure, in real life, such thoughts do occur, but they are only episodic automata: brief, habitual attempts of the biological organism to contract into a cognitive first-person perspective. If their content is left untouched, they dissolve all by themselves. Pure awareness knowing itself can occur as a thoughtless full-absorption episode, but apparently, it can also be accompanied by brief contractions of this sort, or even by longer-lasting and more complex forms of conscious experience (see chapter 34 for some potential examples). One major result of our phenomenological investigation is now not only that nonegoic units of identification do exist (as extensively discussed in the previous chapter), but that there are also nonegoic forms of *self-awareness*. It also seems as if there is a distinction to be made: Some of our meditators simply describe the phenomenal character of pure awareness, but others also describe a quality of *metaknowing* that may be an important part of the pure-awareness experience. Data from many hundreds of meditators show that selfless meta-awareness actually exists—and that it is not some arcane altered state of consciousness, but plausibly a natural capacity of the human mind that millions of people in different cultural contexts have already encountered.

You, the organism that currently identifies with the epistemic agent model in its brain, the embodied conscious self that reads and wants to understand what this is all about, the ego that already knows some things, the ego that apparently stays the same over long periods of time and always wants to know more—you can never fully identify with pure awareness, or know it “from the inside.” Do you still remember our introductory discussion of Thomas Nagel’s seminal bat thought experiment in chapter 3? Nagel’s epistemological point can now be transferred to the context of meditation practice, for there is a corresponding phenomenological discovery to be made here: You can never know what it is like for the *bat* to be a bat, and only pure awareness can know itself nonegoically. But the phenomenology of nonegoic self-knowledge can arise in you, the biological organism. The organism can become acquainted with it, as an ownerless organismic state—but only so long as the identification with the epistemic agent model is suspended. The interesting question is how exactly you, the biological organism that takes itself to be a conscious person, later *appropriate* the experience into the high-level narrative that makes up your “own” life.²

As noted in the preceding chapter, human history (e.g., Indian intellectual history) is full of deep and beautiful philosophical debates about whether something like a “true” self exists, or whether there is no such thing as a self at all. And the specific inner experience that forms the topic of this chapter was known and precisely described by scholar–practitioners who came many centuries before us, including in the form of the Tibetan *rang rig ye shes*, which has been translated as “self-knowing timeless awareness” or “self-cognizing wakefulness.”³ In Western armchair phenomenology—for example, by Franz Brentano, Edmund Husserl, and Jean-Paul Sartre—there are many much more complex but often related discussions about the reflexivity of consciousness.⁴ The idea that conscious mental episodes can be aware of themselves goes back at least as far as Aristotle.⁵ But in our own data-driven investigation, we were not at all interested in the metaphysics or epistemology of selfhood, only in looking at the fine structure of experience itself in as radically bottom-up a fashion as possible. Within our twelve-factor solution, we actually found a statistical cluster (factor 8) that we labeled “Emptiness and Nonegoic Self-Awareness.” This cluster of features seems to be most directly related to the phenomenal signature of self-knowing that we are interested in here.

As can be seen in figure 2.1 in chapter 2, the second- and third-strongest loading items in factor 8 were the two following questions: “Did you feel as though it was not you who had an experience of ‘pure knowing’ without any object, it was rather as if the ‘pure knowing’ was self-aware, knowing only itself, while you had nothing to do with it?” (item #73) and “Would it be a good description to say that there was ‘an emptiness that has awoken to itself?’” (item #75). Item #74 was “Did the experience have a quality of knowing itself?” And it reappeared in factor 3, which we named “Self-Knowledge, Autonomous Cognizance, and Insight.” The strongest item in factor 8, however, related to phenomenal qualities of emptiness and epistemic openness, as well as to the experience of a vacuum or a void. These statistical findings offer useful jumping-off points for qualitative analysis.

In assessing verbal reports referring to the phenomenology of pure awareness turning back into itself, we find that some features belonging to the traditional notion of egoic “self-awareness” can sometimes exist in MPE as well:

- The opening of a new epistemic space
- The phenomenal signature of knowing
- A sense of clarity and epistemic lucidity
- Reflexivity, or the quality of “knowing itself”

According to our reports, the selfless self-awareness of pure awareness knowing itself is an exceptionally clear and lucid state of consciousness. Phenomenologically,

it may be the core feature of stable, continuously self-recognizing wakefulness itself: “self-cognizant wakefulness.” Near the beginning of this book, in chapters 4 and 5, we saw how the conscious experience of wakefulness per se can be described as epistemic openness, as becoming aware of an unobstructed space of possible states of knowing. Selfless self-awareness also opens up a new inner space characterized by an entirely uncontracted signature of knowing, a nondual sense of confidence. And obviously, it carries the phenomenal character of reflexivity—but reflexivity of a very special and holistic kind, a quality that exhibits integration without time, thought, fragmentation, or any internal hierarchy. However, as all of this takes place in a nonselfy, unmediated, and entirely nonconceptual way, it is what academic philosophers might label “direct self-acquaintance,”⁶ “self-intimacy,”⁷ or “nonrepresentational reflexivity.”⁸

The selfless form of self-awareness described by these philosophers and many meditators lacks the phenomenology of self-control and higher-order monitoring, and there is no subject/object divide. It is not something you can *own*. Other classic markers of selfhood and agency are also absent (see chapter 29). As I briefly pointed out in the first part of this chapter, important and seemingly necessary conditions for self-conscious egoic experience are not satisfied. These include mental agency and the phenomenal character of effort (as in controlling thought or deliberately sustaining the focus of attention), plus the experience of duration and identity across time (which in “normal” self-consciousness is typically accompanied by the emergence of an inner narrative). Self-location in space and time, as well as the experiential quality of “mineness” in body-ownership, are equally absent.⁹ Therefore, we can also say that pure awareness never actively turns itself into an object, simply because it is entirely nonagentive, effortless, nonspatial, timeless, and therefore ahistorical.

I think that the phenomenal character I am trying to isolate may be a large part of what makes many describe MPE as an irreducibly *spiritual* state of consciousness (more on this in the epilogue). Within the space of family resemblances related to the experience of pure awareness, reflexive MPE is certainly at least a prototypical core region, and it forms the phenomenological anchor for what many meditators, if asked, may try to describe as the spiritual “essence” of their experience—or as their “true self” (chapter 29).

As we saw in the first part of this chapter, the phenomenal signature of self-knowing implies a nonegoic experience of self-certainty, described by one of our meditators as the nonegoic “pride that consciousness takes in experiencing itself” (#151). What complicates matters is that many earnest practitioners are familiar with philosophical debates about the nature of self or even adhere to certain metaphysical belief systems themselves. Therefore, it is more than plausible that their background beliefs, their expectations, and the conceptual instruments available to them will color not only

their experience itself, but also any phenomenological reports that they may give later. Accordingly, many may describe the experience of pure awareness as getting in touch with, recognizing, or reidentifying with something that has always been there: the “true” or “real” self. This is only natural, and outside scientific research, it is also mostly benign. Yet it is another case of theory contamination, of the alacrity with which the only available conceptual framework influences attempts to verbally report something that was ineffable while it occurred. The neither-nor-ness and the timeless quality of epistemic openness get lost on the verbal level, and this may lead to a deep ambiguity at the boundary between reports about MPE (the prototypical phenomenal character of pure awareness itself) and reports about *reflexive* MPE (the quality of pure awareness as *knowing* itself).

There are several kinds of self-consciousness, or ways of being in a state of self-awareness. Interestingly, what both notions of self-consciousness—the weak, nonegoic experience of “emptiness awoken to itself” described by factor 8 and the robust, everyday phenomenal experience of “being someone”—have in common is that human beings can sometimes *identify* with their content (chapters 1, 25, and 29). Apparently, both types of self-consciousness can function as the phenomenological anchor for reports of the “*I am* this!” or “*I was* this!” type. Therefore, a first interim result of our investigation is that nonegoic self-awareness does exist; the second is that it can also function as a nonegoic unit of identification. Please again note that these two phenomenological insights go a long way toward defusing the false alternative underlying the ancient self/no-self controversy: Just taking the phenomenology seriously allows the metaphysical puzzle of the “true self” to naturally dissolve. If we distinguish the prototypical phenomenal character of pure awareness itself (MPE) from the experiential quality of pure awareness knowing itself (reflexive MPE), then both seem to be things that we can identify with (if that is our criterion for “selfiness”), but only one is a form of self-knowledge (though one that does not involve an epistemic agent model). Whether we conclude that the answer is self or no-self simply depends on what conceptual criteria we are most interested in, and which ones we choose to apply.

But there is more. If one takes contemplative phenomenology seriously, there seem to be at least two types of nonegoic reflexivity—two ways in which the weak, nonegoic experience of “emptiness awoken to itself” can occur. In the first version, awareness becomes aware of itself in a spontaneous and entirely nonconceptual way. It reveals itself to itself (e.g., in a deep and fully absorbed state of meditation). In the second variant—as we saw when looking at “suchness” in chapter 9—*particular* forms of experiential content, like sounds or perceived objects, not only appear against the background of pure awareness, but they also can sometimes gain a quality of nonegoic

reflexivity for themselves. They seem to be coemerging *with* or appearing *out of* a non-dual form of awareness, and sometimes they share the specific phenomenal quality of nonegoic self-knowing described here. This is a phenomenological discovery made by Eastern scholar–practitioners centuries ago but almost completely ignored by Western philosophy.

We can now see that there are at least two kinds of nonconceptual but phenomenally experienced self-knowledge: egoic and nonegoic. My point is that the second type can also be found in perceptual objects. Somehow, the phenomenal signature of *self-knowing* can be part of the experience—but locally, in individual percepts, not only as a global background quality. It is as if they were themselves made of reflexively aware mindfulness, or as if that mindfulness were beginning to “translucently” shine through them. This point is related to the specific phenomenal character that I tried in chapter 9 to describe as “self-revealing,” “self-disclosing,” “self-evidencing,” and “epistemically self-validating.” Perceptual objects have become epistemically open. Metaphorically, one might try to say that in certain meditative states, they too can be experienced as “having selflessly awoken to themselves.” Again, this is a phenomenological possibility that has been largely overlooked in Western philosophy of mind, but that fortunately is now beginning to attract attention.¹⁰ Put simply, my phenomenological point is that the signature of self-knowing can actually be folded into perceptual objects themselves. In contemplative practice, it can become explicit. For a concrete example of what I am referring to, recall report #3160 from chapter 9, describing the phenomenal character of selfless self-awareness in auditory experience: “that it is not a self that perceives the sound, but that there is awareness in/with the sound. There existed a perception that the sound appears in space with awareness and ‘recognizes itself.’”

I think that in the future of consciousness science, nonegoic reflexivity—pure wakefulness recurrently knowing itself—may turn out to be extremely interesting from a neuroscientific perspective, as well as for mathematical and computational modeling.¹¹ From a methodological perspective, a subpersonal but consciously self-knowing type of brain state could easily fall through the cracks of empirical science because—as a state not represented by an epistemic agent model (chapter 25)—it may not be easily reported by experimental participants. Western philosophers may discover that it was described in detail by contemplative scholar–practitioners many centuries ago, for example in Tibet between the third and twelfth centuries. There may also be a specific reason why the phenomenology of nonegoic reflexivity has been largely ignored in Western philosophy and science. You may recall that in chapter 28, when discussing the seminal contribution made to our understanding of the transparency of consciousness by the British thinker G. E. Moore, we rediscovered an important feature of pure

awareness: It is “evasive.” This means that every attempt to willfully fix attention on the quality of awareness per se destroys its originally nondual nature, the baseline quality that William James called “sciousness,” simply because it reintroduces subject/object structure. Pure awareness recedes from attention. We can now see more clearly *why* this must be the case, and how the underlying principle also holds for reflexive MPE. Every effortful attempt to fixate attention on MPE, thereby turning it into a reified target of introspection, automatically creates a subtle hallucination, an inner image of a goal state to be reached—and an epistemic agent model that is directed at this goal state.¹² Imagining pure awareness knowing itself is not the same thing as pure awareness *actually* coming to rest in itself because the latter lacks any form of agency whatsoever.

If we look at those states in which pure awareness apparently “nonconceptually and nonegoically knows itself,” we find a feature that may be closely related to the entirely silent and nonagentive character of reflexive MPE: it is “that which never speaks” (as in report #3624, cited in chapter 32). We have already seen that pure awareness is nonreactive—for example, classical mindfulness practice is precisely the cultivation of a wakeful, gentle, and compassionate state of nonreactivity. But reflexive MPE is also nonagentive. There is no motivational force, and because it contains no incentive to act, it is characterized by a principle of mental inaction. The quality of “reflexively aware mindfulness” that Dakpo Tashi Namgyal spoke of in the sixteenth century is not something that would ever actively reveal itself within a verbal report, or actively point to itself in a social context. The process creating it would not destroy itself—why should it? The fine and subtle quality of awareness silently “knowing itself” can perhaps be described as something that continuously reveals itself *to itself* or as something that continuously points *to itself*, like the arrow of attention now dynamically folding or bending itself back into itself. If sustained, it can create what Longchen Rabjam, seven centuries ago, called the “continuum of recognition” (see the second epigraphical quote presented in this section). But that which reports experiences, that which perhaps boasts about things that happened during meditation, that which may be slightly complacent¹³ when speaking about “stages” and “states” that it has known—that entity is always something else. It is an ego; it has personality traits, psychological conditioning, and emotional needs—and it has had important insights that it feels an urge to share. Perhaps the urge and the complacency really are parts of some last-ditch escape strategy? Maybe there is even a new personality disorder to be discovered, “spiritual teacher personality disorder” (which I cannot abbreviate because in the introduction, I promised that “MPE” would be the only new abbreviation I would use in this book).

Be that as it may, my main point is that because verbal communication is something that happens between egos, in a space that opens itself up between embodied selves in a social context, the nonegoic quality of “pure awareness that knows itself” would never find a place in it. The public sphere is coarse-grained, created by functionally coupled self-models of the egoic and agentic kind; it is constituted by speech acts in which selves, as the philosopher John Austin said, “do things with words.”¹⁴ Those human beings in whom nonegoic self-awareness sometimes appears may therefore feel an intuitive incentive *not* to report it. If it is that which never speaks, why should *they* speak about it? The experience might well thus be evasive not only introspectively, but also socially, as something that gently resists being pulled into the public sphere. As I said before, it is an ownerless state.

Many practitioners may have the sense that it is something precious that has appeared in their life, something very hard to describe and even more easily destroyed by linguistic reification. And if, phenomenologically, they sometimes even *become* “pure awareness that knows itself,” then one would predict that any motivation to speak about it will already have begun to dissolve. Once again, therefore, it is at least conceivable that the specific kind of phenomenal experience discussed in this chapter occurs far more frequently than we may think because it has a tendency to “silence the subject,” and thus to evade scientific investigation via negative self-selection.

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The Elephant and the Blind

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

By: Thomas Metzinger

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